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“Goth Barbies”: A Postmodern Multiperspective Analysis of Mattel’s Monster High Media

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“GOTH BARBIES”: A POSTMODERN MULTIPERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF MATTEL’S MONSTER HIGH MEDIA

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the historical, cultural, and social context in relation to the monster characters of Mattel's *Monster High*, a franchise about animated dolls that are the offspring of famous horror monsters. The animated dolls are an intersection of complex gender and racial identities that are constructed in a postmodern reality. The goal of this research is to formulate a more complex understanding of the social and cultural contexts, relationships, interactions and meanings within production, circulation, and distribution of *Monster High* media.

The preferred reading of the *Monster High* series is postmodernism. *Monster High* displays a multitude of postmodern elements, such as de-centering the subject, intertextuality, pastiche, transmedia storytelling, hyperreality, fragmentation, self-reflectivity, irony, and postmodern identity. Magical elements, fictional places, and colorful and talking creatures allow for young children to separate realism and make-believe.

A negotiated reading of the series allows for a closer examination into the gendered and racialized identities of the monsters as well as gender roles and racial tensions within the series. *Monster High* presents the characters from a heteronormative perspective allowing the actions and storylines of the ghoulfriends to perpetuate stereotypes about binary gender roles. Incorporating monstrous versions of celebrities adds to not only the parodied function of the series, but the series functioning as a hyper-reality that references and reinforces certain aspects of popular culture that relate to young viewers.

Monster High's media content includes stereotypical elements of gender, race, and other intersecting identities, neglects contemporary depictions of Eastern cultures, veers away from societal issues, and sanitizes adult content for childhood consumption. From a postmodern perspective, young viewers can dismiss the physical attributes of the characters as exaggerated, fictional, and fanciful. However, it is harder to ignore elements of discrimination, prejudice, and gender performance within the storylines. While young audiences may not identify with the physical and nonsensical appearance of the monsters, they can relate to the behaviors, interactions, emotions, and values of the animated characters.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my daughter, Ryian, who is the inspiration behind the concept of my research. She taught me and provided much needed insight about *Monster High.* I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Moses and Darlene. Their years of hard work and wisdom have always been a source of inspiration and motivation for everything I do. My family listened to hours of dissertation talk, viewed several videos and movies, and provided unlimited support, even shoulders to cry on. I would not have finished without their support and motivation.

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INTRODUCTION

I have always been passionate about examining gender and racial portrayals in the media and considering the underlying meanings, messages conveyed, lessons taught, and relationships of power both apparent and hidden within movies and television shows. Initially, most of my research examined stereotypes of African American women. I began to understand that a young girl's introduction about self-identity started during childhood and developed during adolescence.

Mostly concerned with media texts targeted towards women, I was curious about the effects that the media had on my 12-year-old daughter, especially when she became fascinated with Disney shows and movies. She not only became a viewer of Disney media but also a consumer of Disney merchandise from clothing, DVDs, games, and the Disney Princess dolls. At first, I was indifferent towards the princess dolls or any doll for that matter, until I realized that there was a lack of diversity among dolls. The first African-American Disney princess, Tiana, featured in *The Princess and the Frog*, was introduced in 2009. After Tiana's release, my daughter still preferred white dolls, whether it was from the Disney Princess franchise or Barbie line. I was not overly concerned with my child having issues with body image, but more concerned about her self-esteem, her identity as a female, and her interpretation of gender roles and norms.

As she grew older, she took an interest in different toys, games, and dolls. As a single parent, my money was limited and I was conservative about items that I purchased to entertain my child. Therefore, immediate and extended family would help purchase gifts and toys, especially for birthdays and Christmas. Because of this, I typically did not pay attention to the number, what kind, or brand of dolls that my daughter had until one

Halloween. She requested to be Frankie Stein. With a puzzled look, I was clueless to who or what she was referring to; it was a girl Frankenstein. As I "googled" Frankie Stein, numerous images of a green monster-like girl character appeared, along with images of other monster doll characters. One thing about my daughter is that she has never been into the princess thing. She dislikes anything pink, frilly, fluffy, and dressy. As she was growing up, the *Twilight* franchise was popular and there was an emergence of vampires, witches, and zombies in children and young adult shows and movies. She was entranced with the gothic culture. I was aware that it was typical of young girls to be influenced by princess dolls, toys, and media, but I was unsure of the effects of gothic culture. What does gothic mean for a child and what type of influence does that have on a child? She loved horror movies and not the PG type; she loved Chucky from the *Child's Play* franchise. At 5 years old, she had an understanding about Chucky and the horrible murders in the film. Did she really understanding that this was pure fantasy or was my child going to become a future serial killer?

In recent years, there is a growing trend towards monsters, witches, vampires, and ghosts featured in children's media. These figures and characters are often portrayed as the "other" and non-normal. I wondered if my child identified with these types of characters because maybe she identified herself as the "other." Are there other children that identify with non-traditional characters because they do not relate to the normative images of whiteness seen in television and film?

My research examines the historical, cultural, and social context in relation to the monster characters of Mattel's *Monster High*[1], a franchise about animated dolls that are the offspring of famous horror monsters. It is significant to take into account the interlocking context of identity categories within society that coexist alongside the monsters, specifically the ghoulfriends. The monsters do not exist in a vacuum void of social and cultural influence. Categories such as race, class, sexuality, and ability are all important cultural factors that must be accounted for in relation to the role of the monster. The characters rupture the traditional ideals of beauty and femininity and move in a direction toward fluidity of gender and subjectivity that is worthy of further investigation.

Media studies consider the effect shows have on children. Media constructs the development of the child and childhood. Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) discussed how childhood is a "social and historical artifact" (p. 2) and the media has become a cultural pedagogical site that educates and informs children by utilizing "dolls with a history, magic kingdoms, animated fantasies, interactive videos, virtual realities, kick-boxing heroes, (and) spine tingling horror books" (p. 4). According to Buckingham (2005), television shows and films attempt to socially construct children by reducing their exposure to sex and violence and teach them moral behavior through good deeds. It is important to study children's media with regard to the representations of gender and race and the ways that identity is constructed for young audiences.

[1] While this research focuses on the media aspects of the franchise, it's important to distinguish between the doll franchise Monster High, the media series *Monster High,* and the actual school Monster High School. The series is always italicized.

This research demonstrates how the animated dolls are an intersection of complex gender and racial roles that are constructed in a postmodern reality. This research examines exactly how the *Monster High* monsters are constructed, the theoretical implications of those constructions, cultural consequences, and future directions. With the pervasive presence of media in everyday life, it is hard to deny the pedagogical and cultural influences that these experiences have on children in American society today. The *Monster High* shows and movies operate as both a site for young children to engage in entertainment, while also learning how women in society generally speak, behave, achieve, and determine values and goals. While princesses and Barbie have been typical role models for young girls, it is important to ask if the animated monster dolls are role models. Does *Monster High* teach and influence attitudes about gender and social norms? In addition, it is significant to examine any changes to Mattel's ownership, mission, or company culture that could have directly impacted and shaped the production and distribution of the physical and animated dolls. Giroux (2001) theorizes that media "becomes relevant as public pedagogy to the degree that it is situated within a broader politics of representation, one that suggests that the struggle over meaning is, in part, defined as the struggle over culture, power, and politics" (p. 593). What cultural messages does *Monster High* convey? What is *Monster High* teaching their target audiences? What does *Monster High* teach about self-identity and self-acceptance? A singular focus on gender or race or class is limiting to the discussion of Mattel's *Monster High*. The goal of this research is to formulate a more complex understanding of the social and cultural contexts, relationships, interactions and meanings within production, circulation, and distribution of *Monster High* media.

Monster High: Beyond the Ordinary

"Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster." The school motto of Monster High school is one way that the franchise is appealing to the individuality of its young consumers (Monster High Wiki). Mattel's Monster High dolls, also known as "Goth Barbies," have brought in millions of dollars in sales for the giant toy company since their debut in 2010 (Ulaby, 2013). Mattel used the production of webisodes and videos to launch and promote their forthcoming doll line. The dolls have been very profitable for Mattel, in contrast to the declining sales of Barbie. According to a manager at a Toys R' Us store, the dolls were their most popular fashion doll, and it was difficult to keep the product stocked on shelves (Fox News, 2013).

The *Monster High* franchise was "inspired by monster movies and iconic ghouls and demons in American culture" and includes but is not limited to TV specials on Nickelodeon, clothing, fashion accessories, dolls and toys, video games, a web series, and movies (Fugate, Kuntze, Matulich, Carter, & Kluberdanz, 2014, p. 7). The dolls are teen characters that attend Monster High School. They are the offspring or descendants of notorious horror monsters or creatures such as Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, the Werewolf, Medusa, the sea monster from the Black Lagoon, the Phantom of the Opera, zombies, ghosts and more. Mattel created *Monster High* as a franchise that would appeal to tween girls aged 6 to 12. This particular age group becomes disinterested in Barbie and childish objects but has become more selective of their choice of toys. The doll characters have similar interests as current teenagers that include fashion, music, sports and even activism (Ulaby, 2013). Monster High is the place "where the teenage children of legendary monsters make a difference," and that is by accepting all creatures to work and

learn together despite differences (Monster High Wiki). Hollie McKay for Fox News (2011) reported, “Mattel claims the dolls positively promote the acceptance of all individuals.”

2016 was a big year of changes for Mattel, the manufacturer of Barbie and Monster High franchise lines. In January 2016, Mattel made a change to Barbie. The doll was transformed to include diverse body shapes, skin tones, and hair. According to Time magazine, Mattel wanted to keep the project a secret codenamed “Project Dawn.” The project took 18 months to complete. The redesign includes 33 new dolls that feature skin tones and body types that are representative of women across the world (Hart, 2016). Another change for Mattel was the loss of their license of Disney Princess dolls. Mattel was the primary manufacturer of the Disney Princess dolls, which analysts estimate as a $500 million business. This means that Disney and their new manufacturer, Hasbro, were redesigning and re-releasing each princess doll (Suddath, 2015). Mattel’s loss of the Disney Princess line means a loss of revenue from its youngest consumers. The Disney line appealed to children as young as 3 years old. In an effort to regain that young audience, Mattel decided to change the design of the Monster High dolls. The new design of Monster High was an attempt to make the monsters less scary by removing the monstrous details of the dolls. The redesign also crossed over into the launch of a new movie, *Welcome to Monster High* (Donnelly & Reed, 2016), which provides the origin story for the school and how all the different monsters came together.

Monster High: Controversial or Aspirational?

Many critics of the dolls have expressed concerns about the projection of body image ideals. One blog suggested that the Monster High brand was “recycling themes

about popularity, fashion, competition within cliques, appealing to the opposite sex and stylized femininity/ sexiness" (Lipkin, 2010). Other reports suggested the dolls would influence girls to attain unrealistic weight goals via eating disorders and dress promiscuously like the characters (McKay, 2011). According to one parent, the dolls are "scrawny" and the arms and hands must be detached to fit into clothes (Ulaby, 2013). Much of the criticism about Monster High is discussed on social media and blog posts. Some entire blogs were intentionally aimed at criticizing the Monster High brand for being anti-feminist by promoting the dolls as sexual objects and stereotypical depictions of young women that only prefer beauty and fashion. Respondents also mentioned racial and cultural identities among the dolls. One respondent mentioned the cultural backgrounds of some of the dolls such as Cleo de Nile from Egypt, Jinafire Long from China and Skelita Calveras from Mexico.[2] The doll characters have personal and cultural traits that reflect these regional differences. Overall, respondents also perceived the dolls as social constructions of a postmodern reality. Many respondents stated that the dolls look thin and skinny, well, because they are dead. They are literally skin and bones. They are also pure fantasy because of their multiple colors such as pink, purple, blue and green.

However, the personnel of Mattel stand by the brand and assert that it promotes positive messages for young girls and teens. Cathy Cline is in charge of marketing for Mattel's girls' brands and stated, "The message about the brand is really to celebrate your own freaky flaws, especially as bullying has become such a hot topic" (Ulaby, 2013).

[2] To ensure confidentiality, neither the name of the blogs nor the web addresses of the blogs and articles will published and to prevent the quotations being tracked to the right blog, some words in the quotations will be changed to different but similar words.

There was some doubt about the creation of the Monster High line being profitable because of the assumption that young girls would reject monster-like dolls. Similarly, Shrek, a green ogre, does not appeal to boys; children do not identify with Shrek. Surprisingly, Monster High appeals to young girls due to cultural trends of self-empowerment, individuality, gothic fashion, and movies (Beusman, 2013). Lori Pantel, vice-president of marketing for global Mattel Girls brands, stated, "The Monster High brand uses the monster metaphor to show girls that it is ok to be different and…unique differences should be celebrated" (Mattel, 2011). But are these differences being constructed positively or negatively to young audiences?

YouTube / Television Studies: Television and Videos as Media Text

There are several approaches that media scholars use to research television and its programming. As one scholar pointed out:

> scholars may focus on problems of enunciation, that is, who speaks a particular TV text and to whom it is addressed; or look at the manner in which we watch TV (who controls the set when it is watched) and at the meanings of its presence in the home; or they may study the so-called "flow" of the programs, the fragmentation of the viewing experience even within any one given program, and the unusual phenomenon of endlessly serialized programs; or, finally, scholars may investigate the ideology embedded in the forms of production and reception (Kaplan, 1987, p. 3).

YouTube embodies similar aspects of television that can be critically researched to examine the particular text, the audience of the text, how the text is controlled, the continuous and often fragmented flow of episodic programming which effects consumer

viewing, and the ideology, message, and interpretation of the text. During (2005) argued that television is a powerful medium that contains four elements: "the broadcast content; the set on which the content is watched; the means of distribution of that content; and the industry which produces the content" (p. 110). For this research, YouTube qualifies as such medium because it contains the same elements: the broadcast content, a computer or mobile device for watching, a website for distribution, and content is uploaded from consumers that either create the content or redistribute recorded material. This section will discuss the relevance of analyzing media messages in television programs and how that relates to YouTube, which is a web platform that allows users to share video content, including content produced by major corporations and broadcast media companies (Burgess & Green, 2009).

According to Jared Karim, one of the founders of YouTube, he credited YouTube's success due to accessing related videos, sharing videos with web links, user comments and embedding videos on websites and social media sites. Although YouTube is considered a media company, it does not produce content. YouTube has "multiple roles as a high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network" (Burgess & Green, 2009, pg. 5). YouTube is a part of media convergence, which "represents a reconfiguration of media power and a reshaping of media aesthetics and economics" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 35). Transferring television content to the Internet changes how and when audiences consume media, especially younger audiences that are finding ways to actively engage on social platforms. Although YouTube has been studied as a new Web 2.0 technology, much of the video content and programming still falls under the category of television and cinema because of its characteristics.

Another aspect of the complexity of television is the competitive nature of the medium for certain audiences. During (2005) argued that television competes against live sporting events, education, and literature; and in recent years, the Internet. This competition is intertwined in Monster High media because initially shows were produced as webisodes and later adapted to television specials. In regards to media studies, there are three areas that scholars focus on: "the formal qualities of television programs and their flow; the intertextual relations of television itself, with other media and with conversation; and the study of socially situated readers and the process of reading" (Fiske, 1987, p. 16).

It is important to examine how YouTube as a digital medium plays an important role in the social and cultural development of children. Children's media often contains stereotypes and hegemonic messages about culture, gender and race. Giroux (1999) argued, "Media culture has become a substantial, if not the primary educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms, that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions - what it means to claim an identity as male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen" (p. 2-3). In order to understand *Monster High* and its media messages, "one needs to be able to (a) understand the socioeconomic context in which it is created, (b) analyze its constructed meanings through careful attention to its particular visual/ verbal/ auditory languages or codes, and (c) determine…what its real-world audiences contribute to the meaning-making process" (Dines & Humez, 1995, p. 1).

This research centers on the question if the dolls and the media characters are perceived as aspirational figures or nothing more than social constructions of a postmodern reality. This research will examine how Monster High media produces and

portrays alternative meanings of power, diversity, and self-identity to young girls. How does the doll help the construction or even the reconstruction of self and identity and does that transfer to its media representation? Does *Monster High* address issues of power, racism, sexism, and class exploitation that oppress and threaten the survival of young girls? This critical research will focus on the significance of the content (narratives, characters, and music) of *Monster High* media through analyses of videos and episodes on the official YouTube channel as well as movies and television specials on Nickelodeon.

Ideology and Ideological Criticism

Ideology can be ascribed to the political, economic, and social belief system in which “beliefs that are taken as natural when in fact they perpetuate the status quo and continue the class system of oppression” (White, 1992, p. 165). White (1992) further explained that "ideology is not a 'message' hidden within a text or system of representation, it is the very system of representation itself and the commonsense principles that endow the system with meaning for those who participate in it" (p. 170). Ideological criticism concentrates on how the creation and distribution of media is influenced by social, political and economic systems. criticism is Marxist theory, which is a critique of capitalism that argues the “bourgeoisie will tolerate advances for the proletariat only if these advances benefit the bourgeoisie even more” (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). Karl Marx (2006) believed the ideas of the ruling class were the ideas and intellectual force that ruled society. According to Marx, ideology is what masked, sustained and generated power in society. Economic, political, and social systems work together to create a “false consciousness” among all social groups within a society.

Another key figure behind ideological criticism is Antonio Gramsci. He agreed with Marx; however, he argued that the subordinate groups consented, rather than being forced, to the rules of the dominant group (Gramsci, 2006). He described that the subordinate groups recognized their status in the public sphere but had a separate status within their own group. Therefore, in the public sphere, subordinates adhere to the rules of the dominant groups while maintaining their own position within civil society. The concept of subordinate consent also influenced the work of Louis Althusser, who described ideology as the "beautiful lie." Althusser (2006) explained that ideology is the way in which the consciousness of the dominant class exercises the exploitation of the subordinate group, while the exploited group accepts their position; therefore, creating a subordinate subculture within the dominant culture. White (1992) described ideological analysis as an approach that attempts "to understand how a cultural text specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs, and ideas" (p. 163). Therefore, an ideological critique examines the relationship between the economic, social and political systems within the media message to determine how the ideology influences audiences and maintains the status quo in society.

American Hegemony and the Media

Hegemony is incorporated into ideological criticism because of the dominance of leadership among groups in a system or society. The class struggle that defines hegemony is adopted from the influence of Marx, Gramsci, and Althusser. Fiske (1987) defined hegemony as "that process whereby the subordinate are led to consent to the system that subordinates them" (p. 40). Hegemony is the concept of how the power systems are natural or normal within society. Within Marxist theory, there are two elements: the base

and the superstructure. The base is the mode of production or materials that creates wealth and ownership. The superstructure is created from the base and becomes societal institutions such as the government or schools that create a belief system. Althusser (2006) referred to the superstructure as ideological state apparatuses or ISAs, which are social structures that teach culture and societal norms. He ascribed family, educational institutions, language, and media as ISAs.

White (1992) stated, "Class divisions are established based on who owns and controls the means of production and who labors within it" (p. 164). The class struggle exists within the business structure of media corporations and mergers. Media is considered to be controlled by and for the ruling or elite class. A small group of media conglomerates (Disney, Comcast, NewsCorp, CBS, and Viacom) control approximately 90 percent of the media content created, produced, and distributed (Clementi, 2015). The mergers of major companies are examples of the economic influence that can literally buy and dominate airwaves. The groups or organizations that own media determine the content that is distributed to people and is highly subjective in favor of the owners. Media is used for capitalistic gains. As an industry, the media is under economic control; therefore, the media is limited on diversifying the content among its audiences and can only project the voice and views of those in charge (McQuail, 2000, p. 95-97).

For example, media giants Disney and Newscorp are similar to the base. The two corporations are powerful owners of the media airwaves that influence the general public through smaller companies and various mediums such as television, newspapers, radio, magazines, and books. The hegemonic power struggle can happen among media companies, where a corporation went bankrupt or merged with another media entity for

financial reasons. Large corporations with money and power are able to dominate and survive longer than smaller companies. Fiske (1987) applied hegemony to cultural studies as the process of "the dominant ideology, working through the form of the text, (being) resisted, evaded, or negotiated within varying degrees by differently socially situated readers" (p. 41). The creation of the dream world in animation provides a framework for the illustration of ideology, opposition, and cultural identity similar to societal ideals (King, Lugo, & Lugo, 2010). Domination is reflected among audiences. The dominant appeal relates to hegemony because the dominant group influences culture. The media content appeals to the dominant class and often ignores the subordinate groups. This is also an example of how power can be maintained and values transmitted to the public.

Gramsci (2006) discussed the two groups: the workers and the intellectuals, which create a cultural division in hegemony. In relation to the media, there are the authors who write the story, producers to distribute the story and audiences to consume the narratives. The intellectuals are the ones creating content and the workers are consuming the content along with the values intertwined in the context. He felt that the only way to overcome capitalist power is for workers to become the intellectuals, which is similar to the public today becoming the producers of content, instead of consumers. Hegemony and the production of culture, especially for children, will be discussed more in chapter II with respect to how companies such as Disney, Nickelodeon, and Warner Bros. are the primary producers of children's media and Mattel is a primary manufacturer of toys.

Semiotic Criticism: Preferred, Negotiated, and Oppositional Meanings

In order to discover the ideology within the messages, semiotic criticism is used as well to analyze the polysemic texts. Semiotic criticism is a way of analyzing the media by

using semiotics, which is the science of using signs and codes to construct meanings to the audience. The term semiotics has been used for centuries; however, philosopher Charles Peirce coined it by formalizing a doctrine of signs. He proposed that an object could represent a sign, which creates an interpretation that could lead to other "interpretants" (Jensen, 1991, p. 41). His work influenced linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who established the field of semiology. Saussure's work determined that signs were dyadic, meaning that signs included a signifier and a signified. The signs are often times the actual words or codes used and signifiers are the concepts of the words (Seiter, 1992). The signifier represents an object, image, or sound; the physical media content. The signified represents the concept of the sign. For example, a person can think about *home.* The signifiers for *home* can mean the street address, the house structure, a city, neighborhood or community. The signified for *home* can be mean family members, loved ones, memories of childhood, and good or bad emotions including such as happiness, love, anger, grievance, or heartbreak. Semiotics influenced the direction of Hall's "encoding" and "decoding" messages.

There are several approaches to analyzing media and Hall's reading theory has influenced the concept of semiotic criticism as a method for media analysis. As Hall (1980) stated, "The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and position in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions" (p. 133). This quote summarizes the way that the meaning of a communication message changes and creates several meanings to different people. People interpret messages differently based on their personal knowledge and social experience. It

may seem that some people have common meanings but that may be because of the cultural experience as well.

Hall discussed how communication is not a linear model but yet continuous and is structured through moments such as production, circulation, distribution/ consumption, and reproduction. When an event happens, a person or source acts as a decoder and informs others (receivers) of the event that has happened. The receivers are the encoders and they translate the given information in various ways based on their social and personal experiences. Through encoding, a source receives the messaged or information and then, decodes the message by translating the events into words and meanings. Hall (1980) discussed the notion of how hegemony influences the content of media messages and interpreted media contexts as encoding and decoding messages. Hall explained how producers create media messages that are received by audience members; thus creating three different readings. There are the negotiated, preferred, and oppositional meanings that come from the various ways that a message is interpreted. According to Fiske (1987), if the reading position is the "social point at which the mix of televisual, social, and ideological codes comes together to make coherent, unified sense," then audiences construct meaning from their social and cultural backgrounds and experiences (p. 12).

The preferred (dominant) meaning is the message that media producers intended for and accepted by the audience. Most media texts have a dominant reading, in order to appeal to mass audiences. If the audience cannot understand the message, then the media text will not be understood and the content will not successfully connect with viewers or readers. The negotiated meaning is how the audience partly agrees with the dominant message but may find some contexts may deviate from the hegemonic message. The

oppositional meaning is that the audience has interpreted the intended message but rejects and disagrees with it. These oppositional interpretations emerge from audience members that have differing social and cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1980). The negotiated and oppositional readings are typically attributed to subordinate or minority groups.

Seiter (1992) discussed the ways in which a communication message can only convey a meaning based on the signs assigned to it. Television reaches a large number of viewers and the successful transmission of the message is dependent on the way viewers encode the message. It is okay for the message to have different meanings and signs but there has to be one dominant factor for all viewers to understand, or else the message becomes misunderstood. This is important to note because meanings can change over time because events can change how we relate or identify with things.

Polysemy/Texts, Media Texts, Barbie as a Text

Fiske (1986b) concluded that television is polysemic because it "allows the various subcultures to generate meanings from it that meet the needs of their own subcultural identities" (p. 392). However, *Monster High* is not limited to television but the digital media (webisodes, music videos, and video clips) is viewed in a similar matter as television. Fiske argued that if television has "contradictory readings" (p. 91), then the viewer should have the capability to cope with the readings and meanings of the text. He also argues that subordinate groups may identify with the oppositional meanings. Zaslow (2012) was able to get students to understand "that audiences are agentic and take an active role in the process of making meaning from the media" (p. 194). Her study introduced "concepts of ''polysemy'' and ''encoding/decoding" (p.197) and allowed students to determine preferred, oppositional and negotiated reading positions.

Fiske (1987) explained that "cultural competence involves a critical understanding of the text and the conventions by which it is constructed…a constant and subtle negotiation and renegotiation of the relationship between the textual and the social" (p. 19). Negotiated readings are produced when the audience accepts the dominant meaning, "but modify or inflect it to meet the needs of their specific situation" (p. 64). Hall (1980) determined that "negotiated codes" form when the reader detaches from the dominant meaning and begins to decode the message in an oppositional way (p.138). The lack of audience data for this research forces a focus on producer encoding and textual analysis, thus requiring incorporation of the negotiated model. This research will attempt to validate the media producer's intentions while examining the contradictions within the media message.

Method: Analyzing Monster High

The messages of Monster High have multiple meanings for different audiences. By examining the contradictions of Monster High, there is reason to explore the characters and storylines from a gender and racial perspective also. Fiske (1987) argued, "characters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology" (p.9). I argue that postmodernism is the preferred meaning for most audiences, but negotiated and oppositional meanings may arise in relation to gender and racial identity. Best and Kellner (1991) describe postmodern theory as a "critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality" (p. 4). They add that postmodernism is a cultural movement after the 1980s that was influenced by the advent of technology, which changed how society understood knowledge. Collins (1992) argued that postmodernism produces a conflicted identity where "the concept of postmodern

subjects as multiple and contradictory…has also led to reconsideration of the effects that popular culture…has on its viewers" (p. 337). The Monster High franchise has a postmodernist approach to the format and storylines. In relation to marketing and advertising practices, postmodernists suggest that consumers should be viewed as individuals, because "postmodernism emphasizes the uniqueness, diversity, plurality and idiosyncrasy of each and every individual" (Brown, 1992, p. 26). The study will also examine how young consumers are learning about different cultures and American folklore through transmedia storytelling, which can be used as a pedagogical tool that disseminates information about products or media across various channels.

I argue that the dominant message of Monster High is postmodern and pure fantasy that is unrealistic and not to be taken seriously, just entertainment. A negotiated meaning will comprise of the contradictory tensions of gender, class, and race. Monster High is produced by the same manufacturer that produces Barbie. Monster High animated dolls will be examined from a gender and racial perspective similar to Barbie and other doll studies. Zaslow (2012) identified Barbie as a "media text" because of the doll's worldwide appeal among adults and children whether male or female. The doll "fits the bill as an object of mass communication, and has been studied by communication researchers" (p. 195). Many studies about Barbie mostly reflect on the feminist and psychological perspective about how the dolls impact gender and body image. Other studies about dolls are limited to self-identity. I question if the Monster High dolls would have a negative effect on young girls concerning body image; also, if young girls self-identify with the dolls or have no connection with the dolls because they are pure fantasy. This study will also determine how the dolls are more than just toys but

subjects that deconstruct the patriarchal and modernist notions of what is normal, by presenting an alternative to how past representations of objects have been socially constructed.

This research is a contribution to the scholarship of dolls as media texts and children's television studies, as well as to studies of postmodernism, gender and race. The research has three foci: 1) *Monster High* universe as a postmodern reality, 2) *Monster High* characters and their representation of women and as an example of a racialized society involved in a social justice movement (the human/monster struggle) and 3) the incorporation of music and popular culture as a marketing tool and cultural influencer. This research will attempt to answer questions regarding identity construction and uncover symbolic patterns, interactions and themes that are central to the creation of meaning of *Monster High*. Overall, this research is a postmodern intersectional examination of *Monster High*. Although, gender and race are examined, the two concepts are not separated from one another.

The proposed research will be a critical ideological analysis of Monster High media and the characters from the official YouTube channel and website. The channel has over 270 videos, which are a combination of webisodes, commercials, music videos, television specials and movies. The research will consist of a two-part process. First, a textual analysis following Hall's reading theory will focus on the preferred and negotiated meanings of the Monster High media. Secondly, the proposed chapters of analysis provide a postmodern critique of Monster High media and characters that will determine how gender, race, and class intersect in respect to the narrative of Monster High universe, the ghoulfriends and the music videos and musicals. Chapter II will

review literature about dominant producers of children's media, elements of traditional and children's horror, and dolls and toys as cultural texts of identity. Chapter III discusses postmodern theory as a framework examining postmodernism in the media, television, and animation. This chapter examines the postmodern characteristics of the Monster High universe and explains how postmodernism is the preferred meaning of the series. The next two chapters offer negotiated meanings of the series. Chapter IV focuses on the main characters, the ghoulfriends, with specific attention to the construction of gender and racial identity within the characters and the intersection of gender and race in postmodern theory. It also takes a deeper look at how the issues of privilege, race, and gender intersect in the Monster High universe, from their interactions with the human world, and how the monsters are portrayed as the "other." The focus is about the isolation of the monsters and the class structure that is constructed among the monsters. Chapter V examines how Mattel has incorporated music and popular culture into *Monster High*. Music videos and musicals have been integral to the marketing and promotion of *Monster High* programs through the use of songs and personification of famous singers and references to pop culture. It is important to examine the underlying ideology of these programs to extract meanings that have the potential to further influence how children construct notions of race, gender, and class, which only work to further marginalize those that do not fit the dominant mold.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This analysis includes a review of literature about dominant media producers of children's media including but not limited to Disney, Nickelodeon, and Warner Bros. I will also discuss monster culture from media representations of monsters in horror films and children's horror. This review will also include the examinations of dolls and toys as cultural and identity texts that may influence gender identity and social norms through child's play.

Disney, Nickelodeon, Warner Bros As Media Producers Of Children's Culture

According to Fiske (1987), "Children are engaged in a constant active struggle to make sense out of their social experience, and that television plays an important role in that struggle" (p. 68). According to one Nielsen (2015) report, over 95% of children aged 2-17 watches approximately 20 hours of television weekly and showing that older teens used the Internet more. Giroux and Pollock (2010) explain, "Products associated with children's culture now garner at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (p. 91). Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) stated, "children's entertainment…is a contested public space where different social, economic, and political interests compete for control" (p.7).

Giroux (1999) discussed the ways that Disney creates and influences a hegemonic culture. He argued that Disney has the social, political, and economic influence to be a pedagogical for children to learn cultural and social norms about race, gender, class and heteronormativity through films and other media. He stated that Disney is able to "shape children's sense of reality: its sanitized notions of identity, difference, and history in the

seemingly apolitical universe" (p. 89). Many of the Disney movies such as *Cinderella, Snow White,* and *Beauty and the Beast* depict women as submissive and domestic servants and showcase violence and male dominance. They are seen as homemakers and their chores are limited to sewing, cooking, and cleaning. The characters Snow White and Cinderella had evil stepmothers that were barriers for finding true love (Aidman, 1999). Giroux (1999) argued that Belle is regarded as a feminist because of her disinterest of Gaston, which signifies the "rejection of hyper-masculinity" (p. 100). The beast in *Beauty and the Beast* is violent and abusive towards Belle. Even though the beast has kidnapped Belle and yells angrily at her, the message of the story is for women to "overlook the abuse, overlook the violence, there is a tender prince lurking within, and it's your job to kiss that prince and bring it out, or to kiss that beast and bring the prince out" (Newberger, 2001).

Kristin Myers (2013) examined feminist messages within children's television programming. She explored how these mediums can send messages to young girls that can potentially influence their perception of gender roles and identity. She argued that the television programs are discouraging the empowerment of girls and women. In this article, the author analyzed television programs for messages that were targeted towards young girls. Myers conducted a qualitative textual analysis of 45 episodes of four television series and examined messages about gender, sexuality, and feminism. This research is an extension of previous research the author conducted that was a focus group of young girls. In that research, elementary school aged girls provided information about which shows they regularly watched, which included *Hannah Montana, Suite Life on Deck, Wizards of Waverly Place* and *iCarly*. These shows air on either Disney channel or

Nickelodeon. The author stated that the girls in the previous study used the messages in the programs as references for real life interaction between boys and girls. Myers found the shows to present anti-feminist messages. The themes of the anti-feminist messages were the celebration of beauty and boys, demonizing femininity, encouragement of girls misbehaving, and post-feminism. According to Myers, the shows send messages that portray girls being attractive and seeking male attention in order to feel complete. There was a dichotomy of feminist elements, where some characters were feminine, confident and sexually assertive yet are also antisocial, self-serving and aggressive. The feminist elements become acts of bullying and rudeness. Even when feminism is portrayed, it is immediately tarnished and deemed irrelevant. Male acceptance overpowers and minimizes the independent and intelligent qualities of the females.

Hentges and Case (2012) investigated gender stereotypical behaviors of characters in children's television shows across three networks: Disney, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon. They examined the gender roles portrayed by female and male characters. The study concluded that male characters were more likely to be portrayed as non-human (monsters and supernatural figures) compared to female characters that were rarely non-human. This is interesting considering that the majority of the monsters in Monster High are female. On Cartoon Network, the male characters "displayed higher levels of physical aggression, being in danger, and rescuing" in comparison to the male characters on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel (p. 10). Their study determined that Cartoon Network appeals to male audiences, therefore, there are more shows that depict monsters and supernatural figures.

Buying and Selling Feminism and Racism as a Commodity

Some scholars referred to animated films as "socializing agents…(that) guide U.S. children through the complexities of highly racialized and sexualized scenarios, normalizing certain dynamics and rendering others invisibles in the process" (King et al., 2010, p. 36). hooks (1984) believed that the media is the conveyor and teacher of white supremacy. She uses the phrase White Supremacy Capitalist Patriarchy to describe how each of the interlocking systems works together to maintain the status quo. hooks describe capitalism as the perpetuator of patriarchy, which attributed to the oppression of women and minorities.

Myers (2013) stated that young girls need to recognize how feminism in the media has been distorted and "reclaim the voice of authority," but the context of the medium, Disney and Nickelodeon, is missing from her argument (p. 203). Myers watched the programs from DVR, YouTube, and limited recordings. Facts about the cast and how the shows are made can be seen between commercial breaks of the shows. The majority of the programming does have female characters as the protagonists, which is opposite from what is seen in mainstream media. Also, female empowerment is encouraged and all children are motivated to achieve their dreams. Some of the female actresses have been allowed to direct some of the shows, and film and television directing is generally a male-dominated field. But does female empowerment equate to feminism or is it a commodity tied to capitalism?

Another approach of media representations of women is "commodity feminism." It is a strategy used to establish a relationship between the corporation and daily life, thus creating a brand that can be easily identified. This form of "branding utilizes techniques

of persuasion to make the brand become a seamless part of individuals' everyday lives" (Murray, 2013, p. 87). The creators do not solely produce media messages; media corporations and companies play a role in the content produced and disseminated across multiple mediums. Disney and Nickelodeon dominate the children's programming in the United States. "Girl power culture" is the predominant theme for the shows and promotional spots that air on the channels (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 120). Occasionally, Monster High presents TV specials that only air on Nickelodeon. Despite encouraging female empowerment, the network managed to capitalize on the tenets of feminism. This contradiction of dueling ideologies of feminism and capitalism spills over into the concepts of commodity and third wave feminism. According to Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991), "Commodity culture…offers the appearance of difference, validated in terms of pluralism or individual freedom of choice" (p. 348). The choosing of different commodities and products including media allows girls to express themselves and define their identity based on tangible items that are seen, such as fashion. Commodity relates to "the realm of money, work, and power" but are corporations the new producers and sellers of feminism (Goldman et al., 1991, p. 349)? For young girls, feminism has shifted from ideals and beliefs to products that can be purchased at the local store or viewed in media. Children distinguish good and evil by the clothing and fashion choices of the characters (King et al, 2010). Girls who purchase a doll or media product are becoming consumers "whose shared identity is defined by the commodities that have or desire to have" such as fashion, makeup, and brand name products (Urla & Swedlund, 1995, p. 282).

There are numerous discussions and examples of racial imagery and stereotypical depictions in Disney movies, Bugs Bunny cartoons and current movies such as *Nemo*, *Shark Tale* and *Shrek*, etc (Giroux 1999, King et al., 2010). Race and ethnicity are other aspects that are commodified in children's media. McClintock (1995) discussed the emergence of commodity racism, which is a marketing strategy to promote and exploit racial imagery and differences in order to sell products. King et al. (2010) argued "commodity racism…becomes a primary mediator in a global, post-industrial order, where the legacies and realities of racism make the system functional, meaningful, and profitable…in which racial difference is desired and demonized" (p. 139). Seiter and Mayer (2004) found that Disney produced "racial caricatures based on animal types" because "animals and fancifully colored characters is one of the primary ways that the politics of representation are avoided" (p. 127-128). These animal characters become "symbols of a world beyond socio-economic realities" that represent various people of class, race and era (Dorfman & Mattelart, 2006, p.124). Another movie *Shark Tale* depicts the sharks as the mafia with Italian accents and threatening demeanors similar to depictions from Francis Coppola's *Godfather* franchise (King et al., 2010). The increase of racial and ethnic groups are portrayed as dangerous and "a direct threat to white supremacy" (King et al., 2010, p. 80).

While scholars note that Disney, Nickelodeon, Warner Bros., and other media producers have attempted to produce more positive representations of racial and ethnic groups, the incorporation of racial and ethnic markers for any characters is still a way to market and generate a profit from those niche audiences.

Emergence of Children's Horror

This section discusses an examination of the transformation of adult horror films to a new emergence of children's horror. Scholars have attempted to define children's horror specifically analyzing horror animation films produced for young audiences (Lester, 2016; Troutman, 2015). Carroll (1999) provided his definition of horror as such:

> A horror fiction, then, is a narrative or image in which at least one monster appears, such that the monster in question is designed to elicit an emotional response from us that is a complex compound of fear and disgust in virtue of the potential danger or threat the monster evinces and in virtue of its impurity. Central to the classification of a fiction as art-horror or genre-horror is that it contains a monster designed to arouse the emotions of fear in the audience in virtue of its harmfulness, and that of revulsion in virtue of its impurity (p. 151).

Monsters have become significant to the horror narrative in order perpetuate the dominant ideology of what is normal (humans) versus their "repressed fears" (monsters) (Lester, 2016, p. 29). And even if the monsters are destroyed or conquered, the possibility of the existence of alternatives creates tension to the normal reality. According to Carroll (1990), the horror plot structure has four essential movements or functions: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation. Onset is the establishment of the monster to the audience. The discovery is where the characters within the show or film become aware of the monster's existence. The confirmation is when the characters provides or presents evidence of the monster to authorities. The confrontation involves the groups of characters attempting to defeat the monster, in which they are often victorious in the end. Carroll further explained that the "objects" of horror are "threatening and impure" (p.

42). He stated that producers of horror must create a monster with certain traits and aspects. Horror monsters should be threatening, dangerous, trigger fears, seek to destroy the world or create an alternative society, and impure. Carroll also discussed the concept of "fusion… the construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/ human, flesh/machine;" it operates as a binary function that can "blur the distinction between living and dead" (p.43).

Jowett and Abbott (2013) identified four genres associated with horror, which include "police investigation series, hospital dramas, comedy, and children's television" (p. 17). In traditional horror works, the monsters are viewed "abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" but in fairy tales or works that are of particular interest to children, the monsters are blended and assimilated into the fantasy world (Carroll, 1990, p. 16). Troutman's (2015) dissertation explored children's animated horror films. From her research, she used three aspects of children's animated horror film to construct the following definition: "(1) a full-length, animated, feature film, (2) marketed primarily to an audience of children with a rating of G or PG, (3) and containing gothic elements including, but not limited to, monsters, ghosts, reanimated corpses, supernatural occurrences, and castles/old houses" (p.8). In contrast to traditional horror, Troutman (2015) argued that children's horror is a subgenre that "adapts the characteristics of horror like fear, monster aesthetics, gothic elements and settings and re-appropriates them for intended audience and ratings" (p. 9). Typically, traditional horror portrayed children "evil or mysterious" and categorized as something to be feared, but they become the victorious protagonists in children's animated horror (Lester, 2016, p. 31). Lester (2016) examined children's horror films *ParaNorman*, *Frankenweenie*, and *Hotel Transylvania*

and found that the themes of the films were "acceptance, redemption, and sympathy" for the "monsters or others who do not fit within the "norm" (p. 30). Jowett and Abbott (2013) explained that children's advertising and television include horror icons such as vampires and Frankenstein. Horror for children's programming blurs the line between the real world and fantasy. For example, the *Scooby Doo* series is about four teenagers and a dog that partake in a mysterious and seemingly supernatural investigation, only to determine that a real person performed those supernatural acts. They further argued that children's horror "allows for the negotiation of identity" because children are the main protagonists and heroes, not adults (p. 28).

Constructing Identity with Toys and Characters Through Play

Toys are material objects that embody the prevailing ideas of the society in which they are made. Toys are more than physical artifacts; they are shaped by ideologies and transmit cultural and social norms and beliefs (Kuznets, 1994). Children use toys to navigate through meanings of gender, race, class and society. Donald Ball (1967) argued that toys help construct children's perceptions about social norms, identity and reality. He determined that toys are socializing agents that act as models and performers of social roles. However, Joel Best (1998) argued that toys do not determine such behaviors; it is the exposure of cultural messages, which influence children's interactions with toys. Kuznets (1994) discovered motifs about toys that come to life in children's literature and said that, "toy characters embody the secrets of the night: they inhabit a secret, sexual, sensual world, one that exists in closed toy shops, under Christmas trees, and behind the doors of dollhouses" (p. 2). Media connections to these toys reinforce hegemonic messages initially created from toys. When combining the concept of play with media,

Russworm (2012) explained that children create identity and can perceive "the self is creatively blending fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, combining objects that represent other people with objects that represent the self" (p.93).

Initially many of the studies of dolls especially about Barbie have focused on gender roles and body ideals that the dolls may portray. She has also been studied as a site of identity for Mexican culture, Native American Culture, and African Africans. The readers create meaning as well as the writer or producer of the text and the doll. Zaslow (2012) performed a study where students perceived "Barbie as a media text that reifies patriarchal hegemonic values such as normative beauty, thinness, whiteness, domesticity, sexual objectification, heteronormativity, and excessive consumption" (p. 196).

Dolls and Toys as Cultural Identity Texts

> *Barbie is just a piece of plastic, but what she says about the economic base of our society-what she suggest about gender and race in our world- ain't good.*
>
> (DuCille, 1994, p. 66)

Most research about dolls is mainly focused on how dolls are cultural symbols that can project body image ideals, gender ideals and patriarchal views of women as objects. Most studies even ignore the issues of race and class because of the limited representations of race within commercial dolls (Chin, 1999). Studies about ethnic dolls are typically ethnographic studies that examine how young girls transform the assigned identity of white Barbie to fit their cultural values. Forman-Brunell (2012) argued, "Dolls are…sites of identity formation seen as shifting, performative, and prescriptive" (p. 9). This means that a child's identity can conform to the identity that is projected from and by the doll through imaginative play. Doll play can be defined as the manner in which a

child engages with the doll in a particular setting and creates a narrative about the toy (Levin & Wardwell, 1962). Along with a fictional identity, dolls carry "intertexts," which contain the original storylines produced by corporations. Children can use the intertexts of the dolls to socially construct play identities that can be comprehended by their play friends (Wohlwend, 2012, p. 595). For example, Monster High has various narratives connected to the monsters of horror films. The traits and cultural concepts of the monsters create familiarity among children.

Researchers have attempted to answer the question of how little girls respond to dolls that do not resemble them. Baby dolls generally teach young girls about motherhood, however Barbie instills lessons about fashion, beauty and adolescence. DuCille (1994) argued that Barbie is "a gendered, racialized icon of contemporary commodity culture" (p. 48). In Schwarz's (2005) analysis, she is concerned with the inaccurate notions that Native American children receive from about American Indian cultures. Her study analyzed the context and description of nine Native American Barbies that were produced between 1981 and 2003. Marketers exploited diversity as a strategy for promoting the differences of the dolls in comparison to white Barbie. Schwarz suggested that Native American dolls were not actually intended for an American Indian market because they are not a large population that affects revenue share. The intention of the dolls was for children to pretend to be stereotypical depictions of American Indians. It is interesting to note that Schwartz argued that Native American dolls are more than toys but entities that should educate children about cultural identity that is often ignored. The multicultural versions of the doll are simply painted replicas of conventional Westernized beauty complete with a slender body type and long straight hair. Along with

physical features, manufacturers attempt to ascribe racial and cultural difference to clothes (DuCille, 1994). That begs the question is it as simple as removing clothes to erase the race and culture of a doll?

In Raynor's (2009) article, she explained the significance of a child having a doll that resembles oneself. She presented an alternative perception of how dolls can influence the identity of young girls, specifically African American. She explained that girls that are not white perceive themselves as "the Other." She believed that her first black Barbie "blurred the lines between race, class, and gender because it became a symbol of acceptance, identity, and power…[challenging] the perception of others" (p. 181). Mattel attempted to challenge that perception by creating the Shani Line. The Shani line consisted of African American dolls that varied in skin tones from dark to light and was the company's way of addressing ethnically correct features in dolls (Chin, 1999, p. 313). However, are "fuller lips, broader noses, wider hips, and higher derrieres" really authentic and representative of African American women? (DuCille, 1994, p.56). Another analysis was conducted about the popular line of Bratz dolls. Guerrero pointed out that the Bratz dolls are governed by images that are oppositional to "naturalized notions of whiteness" (Guerrero, 2008, p. 194). She suggested the Bratz dolls have been commodified based on their exoticism. The different racial identities from traditional white Barbie appeal to ethnic young children. Companies are exploiting the youth's desires for ethnic dolls as a measure of capitalistic gain.

Even though, producers predesigned dolls with identities, the consumers can transform and assimilate the identity into their local culture. In Mexico, consumers replaced Barbie's Americanized identity to match Mexican culture in relation to "the

significance of traditional Maya clothing, a regional dance called *jarana*, and a rite of passage for adolescent girls called the *quince años* ceremony" (MacDougall, 2003, p. 257). An ethnographic study examined Barbie as "a symbol of Yucatec cultural identity" among young girls in the city of Merida, capital of the Mexican state, Yucatan (MacDougall, 2003, p. 258.) The researcher observed how local children assigned cultural identities and values to the doll. Producers re-conceptualize the doll and apply local aesthetics by designing the doll to be shorter, slightly adjusting the body type and assign blue eye shadow as the makeup. Young girls consider the doll to be a reflection of social and gender roles of Mexican life, which center on family and traditional roles rather than feminist ideals. Instead of seeing Barbie as an independent workingwoman, young girls play house and assume the mother role (MacDougall, 2003).

Advertising is another medium that perpetuates stereotypes and gender roles especially for products marketed to children. In Li-Vollmer's (2002) article, she examined how social power is depicted in television commercials. The study reviewed the visibility, status and roles that are attributed to racial groups in advertisements. It was determined that the visibility of racial minorities was segregated among different products. When racial minorities are shown, they are depicted into stereotypical and lower prestige roles. One interesting note is that commercials for Barbie and other fashion dolls were the only ones that included children of various racial groups.

Phillips (2002) discussed the narratives produced when playing with Batman and Barbie. He argued that Batman has a narrative that is integral to the process of play, meaning that children have to know the story of the superhero in order to play Batman. In contrast, Barbie is just a material object that has a fluid identity. Children can create their

own narratives about the doll and adapt it to their experiences. While he explained that playing with Batman is to stay within the dominant cultural narrative of the hero, Barbie has a postmodern identity because "the material manifestation of the doll, the sensorimotor, image and language experience of it all reinforce a cultural subjectivity of fluidity, adaptability, and unfixedness" (p. 134).

However, there is a limited scope of research about Mattel's secondary doll franchise, Monster High. Wohlwend (2015) examined the doll franchise as not only a toy but as "a site of identity construction and digital media production" (p. 2). Monster High dolls and the media characters represent fantasy storylines that are constructed and produced by young female consumers. Ghoulia Yelps was analyzed as an identity text that produces imaginary "notions of girlhood" (pg. 5). Ghoulia Yelps is a zombie who is smart, shy and often has her head in the books. She is very pale and she wears glasses. However, her facial expressions and body movements are limited because of her zombie nature. Her zombie language consists of only moans and grunts. Zombies are typically bodies without minds; however, the creators decided to make Ghoulia one of the smartest characters of Monster High (Monster High, 2015). Wohlwend (2015) argued that the creators and marketers of the product line established "the anticipated identities of sexy girl, trendsetter, and avid shopper" for the dolls. Four imaginaries about girlhood emerged: "fashion, adolescent sexuality, diversity, and schooling" (p. 8). The fashion imaginary provides significance to the future purchasing power of women and the various products that are associated with fashion, hair, cosmetics and accessories. The adolescent sexuality imaginary projects a future hyper-sexualized teen image that tween girls will aspire to become as they mature in age. The diversity imaginary is more complex in

which children perceive the different skin and hair colors as unique and diverse.

However, the monsters are somewhat racially categorized by their monster species, i.e. vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and zombies. The schooling imaginary demonstrates friends and social groups as a means of gauging popularity status. Also, male companionship is sought after but can lead to contention with other girls (Wohlwend, 2015).

Digital Play: Tweens as Consumers and Producers of Digital Media

This section reviews the trend of digital media culture and how tweens are becoming consumers and producers of digital content on social media, especially YouTube, which constructs gender and racial identity as well as social norms. Monster High originally debuted on YouTube, presenting mini webisodes that introduced Frankie Stein as a new student attending Monster High school. YouTube is a unique medium that uploads and displays videos like television but allows for user engagement like social media. Social media is a form of electronic communication for social networking through which users create virtual (online) groups or communities to share and access information, ideas, personal and business messages, pictures, audio and video using the Internet (Albarran, 2013). Social media includes a broad range of online platforms, such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, video and photo communities, and social news. They have become powerful word of mouth communication mediums and changed the way people communicate and keep in touch with their social groups (Anderson, 2008).

The public is producing and publishing their own content by posting videos, blog posts, pictures and even creating personal websites. Social media sites like Facebook and YouTube make it easier for consumers to upload and post original content and

disseminate it to larger audiences. Previous research suggests an inverse relationship between age and Internet use: as age increases, Internet use decreases. Teenagers are known to be active in content creation for the Web. Tweens and teenagers spend several hours per day on social media. However, the young demographic is more likely to be watching videos and listening to music, rather than getting politically involved (Robb, 2015). Approximately 65% of adults participate in social networking sites, while over 90% of young adults ages 18-29 admitted to using social media more frequently than older age groups (Perrin, 2015). Audiences have different reasons why they use media; it could range from information and entertainment, social interaction and community development, self-expression and actualization, interdependence, participation and producing of contents (Shao, 2009). In addition, a person's personality including their emotions, enthusiasm for life, age and gender are connected to their consumption of social media (Correa, Hinsley & De Zuniga, 2010).

Mattel uses research to learn about the habits and daily lives of their young demographic. Entering the millennium, Mattel decided to follow the growing digital trend and re-conceptualize Barbie into media culture. The producers created a movie for the doll that was successful, leading to the production of more direct to video movies (Netherby, 2007). Children are choosing interactive toys and media as opposed to physical toys. While Barbie has attempted to transform as a digital figure via the Internet, video games and DVDs, the doll is losing interest among the media literate generation (Gogoi, 2009). Instead of reinventing Barbie, Mattel created other franchises that could keep up with the digital media culture. Similarly, the Monster High franchise has a variety of media outlets and products that permeate a multitude of social media platforms

including video games, mobile apps, webisodes, blogs, official Mattel social media sites and Tumbler. Fans, critics, scholars and even doll collectors have created and produced digital media and videos promoting or critiquing the popular franchise (Wohlwend, 2015.) This concept is how the consumer becomes the producer. The consumer can choose which outlet to enjoy the products and if they would like to add to social media conversations or even create new content on the wikia site, they have full access online. Tweens are also capable of producing and sharing content online of their experiences and opinions about Monster High. Children bring their own interpretations of the dolls and share those identities with others (Wohlwend, 2015). The tween demographic of children are moving towards more mature images and products but still desire to play with toys (Fugate et al., 2014). Bickford (2012) explained, "Tween media positions kids as legitimate consumers in the marketplace, but also, through anticipatory tropes of maturity and contradictory tropes of innocence, as particular, marked subjects" (p. 431). The combination of sexualized products and new media technologies can send the wrong messages and images to tweens about self- image and lead to "premature sexualization."

A critical analysis about pre-teen girls determined that there are various ways in which the girls engage with media and understand the contexts and messages differently across different mediums. The researchers found that the girls were capable of making "critical deconstructions of media products" (Vares, Jackson & Gill, 2011, p. 152). However, there is research that determined young people "can and do actively and critically engage with media representations in quite complex ways" (Vares et al., 2011, p. 140-141). This suggests that tweens are capable of making logical and informed decisions about the types of products and brands they choose.

Mattel boasted $605 million in sales for the first quarter of 2015 for just the girls and boys brands; this figure excluded profits from American Girl brands, construction and craft toys and Fisher Price. Upon observation, one cannot help but notice that one of the "six strategic priorities" for Mattel is "exploiting the franchise strength of our core brands" as reported in a financial results slide presentation for 2015's first quarter (Mattel, Inc., 2015). Ultimately, Mattel is a business operating to increase revenue and attract new and more consumers. But the problem with marketing to tweens is that their interests change with trends; they can become disinterested in things quickly as they are growing and learning new things (Fugate et al., 2014). According to the Mattel's (2015) sales report, Monster High had a minor decline in sales that offset the increase of the Disney Princess doll sales. Marketing strategies must be planned accordingly to how and where tweens are involved in media and the world. As Fugate et al. (2014) cited, "Event marketing such as concerts, movies, sporting events and school text books is an important tool for reaching tweens." Mattel uses this strategy to cross promote Monster High from YouTube to television with the introduction of television specials and seasonal shows and musicals typically marketed as Halloween specials.

WE ARE (POSTMODERN) MONSTER HIGH

> *The new era of childhood---the postmodern childhood---cannot escape the influence of the postmodern condition with its electronic media saturation*
>
> (Kincheloe, 1997, p. 45)

Postmodern theory is the theoretical framework that guides this media analysis of *Monster High*. A multi-perspective approach to postmodernism in relation to gender and race is incorporated into the analysis of the Monster High franchise and its media components. For this research, I consider postmodernism only as it relates to media and popular culture. I focus on the development of the theory from the scholarly work of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. Postmodernism is discussed as it is applied to television, film, animation, and music videos. There is also discussion of postmodernism in relation to gender and race and animated representations of both identities.

This chapter offers a postmodernist reading of the popular *Monster High* series, with special regard to the postmodern concepts: de-centering the subject, intertextuality, pastiche, transmedia storytelling, hyperreality and fragmentation, self-reflectivity and irony, and postmodern identity. The objective of the chapter is to apply these concepts to *Monster High* and reveal some of the foremost characteristics of postmodernism, which is the preferred reading of the series.

Influences of Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson to Postmodernism

Lyotard (2004b) argued that postmodernism is the "incredulity towards metanarratives," which rejects the hegemonic narratives that have constructed societal values and beliefs (p. 123). His work challenged how knowledge is created and deemed

true. By acknowledging a dominant truth, alternative truths (subordinate and minority groups) are suppressed. He proposed that the "postmodern age" would be a period where "knowledge is altered" (p.124). He discussed that technology and machines would change how knowledge is created, disseminated, and understood. Lyotard argued that the "producers and users of knowledge…possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn" (p. 125). Similar to semiotics, Lyotard (2004a) discussed the "reality of a referent," which can be a phrase or expression (p. 214). He explained that there are four aspects to the referent, which are that "there is someone to signify the referent and someone to understand the phrase it signifies; the referent can be signified; it exists" (p. 214). So words (texts) can only have meaning if they are signified by someone and accepted by another. His work did not specifically discuss the postmodern condition of media but lays a foundation of understanding language and discourse that is typically analyzed within the scope of media.

Jean Baudrillard (1988) examined the correlation among reality, signs, and society. However, he argued that there is no referent but only a copy or representation of the original, which is a simulation. He explained that the simulacrum (image) has four phases: it represents reality, distorts that reality, hides the non-existent reality, and actually is not connected to the reality but is its own "pure simulacrum" (p. 170). For Baudrillard, there is no connection between the sign and its representation because they work independently of one another. He used the example of Disneyland as a model for simulation. Disneyland is a manifestation of an imaginary world of childhood fantasies, yet it reflects American ideology. Because it is believed that Disneyland is fantasy, it creates the illusion that anything outside of Disneyland (Los Angeles) is real. He also

connected simulation to the concept of television. He argued that the television is "where real events follow one another in a perfectly ecstatic relation…through vertiginous and stereotyped traits, unreal and recurrent, which allow for continuous and uninterrupted juxtapositions" (p. 187). Television programing and advertising work together to create a simulated reality for audiences.

Jameson (1991) argued that media is structured by three facets: "that of an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production, that of a specific technology, generally organized around a general apparatus of machine; and that, finally, of a social institution" (p. 67). For example, a television show is a form of aesthetic production specifically produced for a television set that receives its programming and signal from a media industry. Traditionally, the media industry was not considered a social institution, however, Silverblatt (2004) argued that mass media has the characteristics of social institutions. Mass media provides information, socialization, educational programming, and a "safe place" for discussion and interaction on social media (p. 40).

Jameson also argued that postmodernism is a "cultural dominant" that coincides "with other resistant and heterogeneous forces, which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate." He adds that capitalism created cultural hegemony by allowing "a space for various forms of oppositional culture: those of marginal groups, those of radically distinct residual or emergent cultural languages" (p.159). Jameson contends that writings are not representations of history; rather they are society's perceptions about the past. Similar to Jameson, Mircea (2013) added that postmodernism is a concept that includes "the multiple forms of otherness as they emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class" (p. 107). Television shows, movies, and films consist of

messages that are produced for and interpreted by diverse groups of people.

Each scholar added more insight to the concept of postmodernism in media studies. There is a similarity in their beliefs that postmodernism and postmodernity have created a disillusion of truths and real knowledge. Media and technology have impacted the way that knowledge is created and consumed and has also blurred the distinction between what is real and what is not.

Postmodernism and Mass Media

Defining postmodernism is complex because of its different principles. Tudor (2012) explained that three aspects define postmodernism: the historical, the economic, and the art culture. Postmodernism seems to reject originality and the elements of modernism. It allows for the acceptance of mystical and marginalized values within the context of television and media programming. Brown (1992) stated, "Postmodernists prefer disorder, ambiguity, heterogeneity, plurality, complexity, and differences" (p. 22). Some elements of postmodernism in media are irony, cultural references, intertextuality, self-reflection, pluralism and contradiction (Baudrillard, 2004; Storey, 2005). In cinema, Hayward (2000) identified four concepts of the postmodern aesthetics: "simulation, which is either parody or pastiche; prefabrication; intertextuality and bricolage" (p. 277). These common elements are typically found in postmodern media but in no way are these characteristics necessary for postmodernism since the term is relatively fluid.

One concept of postmodernism is about the imaginary, where multiple realities co-exist together (Firat, Dholakia & Venkatesh, 1995). Because postmodernism rejects the notion of grand narratives, multiple narratives are used and can be combined to create an alternate narrative. Harms and Dickens (1996) explained that "the ability to

mechanically reproduce, store, retrieve, and communicate information and images from a plurality of sources and contexts contributes to a particular style that is characteristic of postmodern culture—pastiche" (p. 216). In this sense, the multiplicities of stories intertwine to create one storyline whether it is realistically possible or not.

Another principle of postmodernism is intertextuality. It is argued that the styles and cultures of the past create "nostalgic recycling," which happens when the consumer is re-introduced to past narratives (Storey, 2005, p. 138). Campbell and Freed (1993) suggested that intertextuality is "the idea that we understand and make meaning from culture because of our dependence on other and older texts - books, magazines, news, songs, movies, and television shows among them" (p. 81). This can work in two ways. Television can air current and past episodes of a series. At times, for example, re-runs of the *Brady Bunch* or *Full House* are in syndication, airing as if the episodes are current but were actually created decades ago. Then, there are shows that parody programming of the past such as *Saturday Night Live* or *In Living Color* that mock the characters of past shows (Collins, 1992).

Another element of postmodernism is fragmentation. It creates discontinuity when used among various media platforms. Viewers dictate the overall narrative or storyline of a program and they can watch videos at anytime and/or interact with other consumers through social media (Watson, 2005). Younger audiences tend to consume more visual media as opposed to print media (Van Raaij, 1993). The channel MTV created a sense of fragmentation by broadcasting a succession of disconnected music videos that challenges the notion of completeness for the viewer. Fragmentation can also lead to pluralism, where the program does not center on one main character, yet a set of principal characters

and their storylines. *M.A.S.H* was a program that had a fragmented cast and multiple plots that created the illusion of being on the military base (Collins, 1992).

Another element of postmodernism is Baudrillard's (1988) concept of hyperreality, which is how television contains endless simulations in which reality simply disappears. One example is the continuous flow of images and pictures. Although, images may not be connected thematically, the commercials and the episode become a part of the commercialized programming that stimulates the audience. Television provides an uninterrupted simulation of images that distract the viewer from reality.

Postmodernism and Animation

Animation establishes a space and realm for characters to display unusual human traits of gender and race. Langer (2004) said, "Animation was for many years a marginalized form of expression with little cultural capital" (p. 157). So, in regards to identifying high culture and low culture, animation is categorized as low culture because of its design and appeal to children. Scholars have argued that since 1995, animated films have been associated with postmodernism by becoming more "intertextual, ironic, irreverent, self-referential, and satiric" (King et al., 2010, p. 26).

For example, on the animated series *The Simpsons,* Bart is watching the balloons of the Thanksgiving Day parade and a float that looks like him appears. As Bart watches himself on television, the viewer acknowledges the irony of how much of a popular icon Bart has become by being included in the parade (Collins, 1992). Russworm (2012) offered an interpretative-based analysis of *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* and noted that the show contained postmodern elements. The boys imagine themselves as members of the "Junkyard Band" and play with junkyard objects that magically play. She argued that

the show contained “recycled images, shaded silhouettes, stock footage, and outlines of whole environments” that seem to blur the line of normal sense and nonsense (p.97).

Kellner (1998) examined MTV’s animated series *Beavis and Butthead* and provided insight into how contemporary youth were impacted by media culture. He argued that the show was postmodern and a “product of media culture” because it often parodies media shows and characters (p. 88). The entire basis of the show and characters are ripped from *SNL*’s comedy sketch, “Wayne’s World.” The characters Beavis and Butthead seem to exist in “the utopia of no parental authority and unlimited freedom” (p. 89). Kellner also argued that the show influenced young audiences to imitate the demeaning, lazy, and violent behavior and language of Beavis and Butthead.

Troutman (2015) examined animated children’s horror films and found postmodern elements such as pastiche, recycled images, and hybridity. Many of the films analyzed portrayed the children as white protagonists that performed violent acts that save the day. The children also lived in a world void of parental authority, allowing the child characters to act as adults would.

Postmodern concepts of *Monster High*

At first glance, Monster High School may resemble a regular high school, but it definitely is not normal. The monsters are variations of classic horror monsters. Some have realistic colors and features like Clawdeen, who is a werewolf with brown fur and claws and Cleo de Nile, who is an Egyptian princess with a golden-brown skin tone wrapped in golden mummy cloths. In contrast, other monsters have pink, blue, purple or lime green skin tones. A significant portion of the show’s parody lies in its use of monster puns and lexicon. Girls are referred to as ghouls. Their class subjects consist of

"home ick," "biteology," "physical deaducation," and the "dead languages." For happy occasions or good news, it is referred to as "clawesome" or "fang-tastic."

For the *Monster High* series, I identified numerous postmodern concepts such as de-centering the subject, intertextuality, pastiche, transmedia storytelling, hyperreality and fragmentation, self-reflectivity and irony, and postmodern identity. The series is not limited to these concepts; however, I argue that these are the most prevalent postmodern elements that are used to convey the dominant reading of *Monster High.* Young viewers are initially exposed to the postmodern elements of the series, which allows the audience to view the animated characters and series as pure fantasy and fiction that is not representative of the real world.

De-centering of the subject

Monster High is a web-based series with television specials that portray a contemporary society that centers on the high school. The creators allow the audience to experience the entire spectrum of monster society in a fictional town named New Salem by utilizing numerous characters to represent its fictional world. Various characters are used to symbolize different types of people in the world. This town replicates American suburbia. The physical location of the town is not exotic or removed from a setting with which viewers are familiar. The generic town allows the audience to bring the location closer to home, merging their experiences of suburbia and school.

Rather than focus on one individual, the brand is about the diversity of Monster High School. The franchise has frequently introduced several new ghouls and monsters

over time. The storylines of *Monster High* mostly center around seven main characters[3]: Frankie Stein, Clawdeen Wolf, Cleo De Nile, Draculaura, Ghoulia Yelps, Abbey Bominable and Lagoona Blue. Viewers are not limited to identifying with one character. Similar to the *Simpsons*, "the characters are also very different and invite identification with different viewers, and…offer not a singular model of postmodern identity, but plural models of postmodern identity" (Ott, 2003, p. 61). However, there are new additions and collections such as the Boo York collection. *Boo York, Boo York* (Lau, 2015) is a musical special, which was introduced in September 2015. The musical still featured some of the main characters, but also focused on other monsters: Operetta, Catty Noir, Elle Eedee, and Astronova. Although episodes most frequently center on the main ghoulfriends, their developing storyline leads to the introduction of dozens of different characters along the way, which offer fragments from diverse parts of monster society that together form the multifaceted depiction of the *Monster High* universe.

Subjectivity in *Monster High* is disbanded with the multiplicity of characters that appear in each webisode, TV special, and commercial. The various characters and different identities create an objective viewing, instead of subjective. *Monster High* demonstrates this de-centering of the unified subject by focusing its subject matter on groups of people that traditionally serve in the background. Some of the plotlines for the TV specials focus on one character, which typically introduce a new character of the school. In *13 Wishes* (Duncan, Paden, & Sacks, 2013), a magic genie is discovered by Howleen Wolf, Clawdeen's younger sister and grants her 13 wishes, which affect several

[3] For the 2016 re-launch of the franchise, Ghoulia was removed as one of the main characters. Mattel has not stated if she will be in the 2nd generation of *Monster High*.

monsters of the school. Howleen is not always seen in the series but some webisodes feature her. Twyla, the daughter of the Boogeyman, is Howleen's best friend. She is very shy and often hides in the background literally as a shadow. She is also introduced in *13 Wishes* (Duncan, Paden, & Sacks, 2013). Other ghouls such as Spectra Vondergeist, Jinafire Long, Jane Boolittle and Toralei have major storylines in the series, even though they are not included in the main group of ghoulfriends. By focusing entire episodes on the obstacles and triumphs of such characters as exchange student Abbey Bominable, shy and lonely Twyla, environmental advocate Venus McFlytrap, royal socialite Cleo de Nile, and others, *Monster High* manages to represent the pluralism of a postmodern society, de-centering the subject and allowing for the deconstruction of ideology within the narrative and emergence of difference perspectives from the characters. The decentered perspective disrupts the concept of a homogenous monster type, rejecting sameness and embracing difference.

Intertextuality, Pastiche, and Transmedia Storytelling

Harms and Dickens (1996) stated, "While people have reproduced or covered cultural texts for centuries, what is new and postmodern about these contemporary media practices is that new technologies and techniques permit cultural texts to be reproduced and recombined in different contexts" (p. 215-216). *Monster High* recycles the storylines of mythical creatures that have been embedded into popular culture since the characters are the offspring of classic monsters of American horror. Stymeist (2009) argued, "Myth, like culture itself, is something that is generated, revised, and regenerated in response to economic and political forces" (p. 396). Audiences are presented with a historical context of each character based on the cultural history of the parent monster.

In *Freaky Fusion* (Blais & Lau, 2014a), audiences learn how the school began and meet some of the ancestors of the monsters. The monsters go back in time through a time portal. Based on Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein* and Whale's (1931) film adaptation of the story, Victor Frankenstein is introduced as a human student at Monster High school that is interested in science. He is determined to create "life" but struggles to find the way to make his monster come alive. With the help of Frankie and the other ghouls, he figures out how to create "life." The story is more similar to Whale's version of Frankenstein's story (the visual appearance of the monster) rather than Shelley's version, but the series uses some of the elements of Shelley's text (the diary of Victor Frankenstein) to reconstruct the story behind the creation of Frankenstein's monster.

The references to the past and historical settings of the movie signify the intertextuality of the storyline. The visual looks of the 19th century are adopted in order to reflect the setting of a historical event being represented. Viewers are transported into the 1800s through stereotypical images of that era, as the vivid colors of the present are faded to the gray-scaled colors symbolic of the time period in which the story takes place. Common perceptions of the past parallels Jameson's concept about the loss of historical reality. Jameson (1991) argued, "Nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche…to appropriate a missing past … refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation" (p. 19). By applying his concept of nostalgia films to postmodern animation, the impression of the past is typically depicted as a representation of the past that is presented in the media with a lack of color and different clothing. Clawdeen makes a reference to the fact that their fashion styles have never been seen in 1814. Jameson further stated, "We are condemned to seek History by

way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history" (p. 25). In this sense, *Monster High* adopts allusions of the past and intertwines the images to produce the fictional reality that brings the present to the past. The audience perceives past images as signifiers of the past reality of *Monster High.*

The past is also depicted in *Ghouls Rule* (Fetterly & Sacks, 2012). The teacher shows the class an old film that is the history of Halloween, which tells the monsters that humans are to be feared as monster hunters. The film is like a black-and-white documentary opening with a countdown and projecting a grainy texture. Frankie is in disbelief that humans are enemies and is determined to disprove the teacher. The students end up going to the catacombs to find the true meaning of Halloween. They discover the Hall of Halloween, where a hologram of a skeleton tells them that Halloween was created by humans in order "to honor and praise all of the monsters of the world." This creates a new kind of historical reference to Halloween, especially for children that do not know how the concept of Halloween was developed. The combination of historical references of Victor Frankenstein, Victorian-era clothing, Halloween, and the lack of bright, vivid colors create the illusion of a realistic past that blurs the line of real and fantasy.

Another character that blurs the line of fact and fiction is Cleo de Nile's father, Ramses, an ancient pharaoh of Egypt. He has a more active role in the series, especially being involved in the lives of his two daughters, Nefera and Cleo. He dislikes Cleo's boyfriend Deuce (son of Medusa) because he is not royalty. Cleo refers to the students of Monster High School as her royal subjects. She generally uses Ghoulia as her assistant, who carries her books, does her homework, and performs other servile tasks. Cleo also has the capability to charm snakes and beetles and conjure plagues and curses, making

reference to the biblical plagues of Egypt. She taps into the power of an ancient idol with a large gemstone to persuade others to do want ever she desires. Cleo and her sister have released plagues casting out locusts and frogs. They also have house servants resembling Anubis, the god of mummification that has a canine head and/ or body. The references to the cultural history of Egypt combined with biblical allusions of the plagues establish a sense of realism for Cleo's character.

Pastiche builds on the intertextuality of *Monster High*. Each offspring and monster has their own separate narrative based on past horror films; however, *Monster High* presents a new narrative for the monsters to co-exist. Jameson (1991) explained that pastiche is similar to parody and defined it as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" (p. 17). He further explains, "The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (p. 17-18). The concept of monsters is not new or original, yet the creators reinvented the storyline to adapt to additional characters and elements of the concept of teenage monsters attending high school.

Each monster has a storyline that tells of places, times, and events that do not correlate to other monsters. The characters of *Monster High* never seem to age or progress in school. Since its debut in 2010, only three characters have had birthdays. However, the ages are not similar; Draculaura is 1600 years old, Frankie is 16 days old, and Clawd's age is not revealed. For example, Draculaura is presumed to have been born in the first few centuries. She grew up in Transylvania. For Draculaura's 1600th birthday, the ghouls want to do something special for her. Her birthday also happens to be on

Valentine's Day; however, it is revealed that Valentine's Day was created for her by another vampire (Mckenzie & Sacks, 2012).

Abbey grew up in the mountains of Scaremerica. Lagoona is from the Scarrier Reef near water. The monsters are from fictional locations that would not typically come together in a storyline. Most monsters are labeled exchange students if they do not fit the location central to "normal" monsters, which is similar to American hegemony. The exchange students are racialized with markers and accents to differentiate them from other typical monsters. The compilation of various monsters and their backgrounds symbolize unity for the *Monster High* universe. Campbell and Freed (1993) suggested, "Many supporters of postmodernism argue that among its best promises are the re-examination of utopian possibilities and the recouping of progressive community" (p. 80). Culturally, horror monsters do not crossover into other storylines, so *Monster High* rejects the modernistic approach of classic monster storylines and intertwines the stories together to form the Monster High community. The monsters are timeless. The area is placeless. The monsters seem to be fictional and complete nonsense, yet they represent most teenagers anywhere in the current postmodern age.

Among other concepts of postmodernism, transmedia storytelling is the bridge between postmodernism and the children that are consumers of the Monster High franchise. Henry Jenkins (2007) defined transmedia storytelling as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (para. 4). This method is employed by *Monster High* to teach children and expose them to various mediums that created Monster High school and universe. Based on the

research of Stotler (2013), she defined transmedia as “a central world from which all other media branch and to which all other media reconnect” (para. 2). From webisodes, television specials and books, children are introduced to different elements of the Monster High universe.

Transmedia storytelling can also be used as a pedagogical tool that disseminates information about products or media. For example with *Monster High,* children that are engaged in the storylines of the characters may be curious of the origins and history of the parent monsters. Stotler (2013) used the example of learning about Cleo de Nile’s father (the Mummy) and the origins and customs of Egypt. *Monster High* and the physical dolls lead young consumers to learn the history and traits of each of the characters. Bell (2017) stated, “The intertextual nature of *Monster High* necessarily means that children are bringing these action-oriented stories into their own lives through media-directed play” (p.128-129). This is not to label the Monster High franchise as an educational product, but the various media outlets allow for young, inquisitive consumers to learn the historical context of the monsters’ origins. The brand also allows for girls to invent their own monster doll with “Create-A-Monster kits” (Wohlwend, 2015, p. 8). There are online versions of the kits, where girls are able to change the clothes, designs, and jewelry of the digital doll. This corresponds to DuCille’s (1994) argument that race and culture are attributed to material things and can be easily interchanged between dolls.

Hyperreality and fragmentation

The creators of *Monster High* developed an entire hyperreality for the characters, yet the location of the school or community is unknown. Monster High school has a remote location away from human society, but it is never revealed how to get to Monster

High until *Welcome To Monster High* (Donnelly & Reed, 2016). In the movie, Draculaura uses a magical device that locates monsters for the school, but it is still never shown where the school is located. In *Ghouls Rule* (Fetterly & Sacks, 2012), the monsters used the sewers of the catacombs to travel to the "normie" high school. In *Electrified* (Falkenstein, Veilleux, & Zourelidi, 2017), the ghouls want to establish a fashion salon for humans and ghouls. Frankie suggests using an old power station to transform into a salon. The access point to this salon seems to be below ground from a tunnel. So if the salon designated for humans is above ground, then one might presume that the monster world is below ground. However, it seems that tunnels are used to go from monster society to human society because Monster High school is above the tunnels also. The tunnels and catacombs become ways to access and enter into different hyperrealities. The multiple storylines of the monsters are told through various media outlets and these "continuities" create the complexity of the *Monster High* world. As defined by the wikia account for Monster High, "continuity is a collection of stories that with (near) certainty can be said to be part of the same storyline." This allows for the characters to have similar storylines for one media and then another storyline for other mediums. So continuities from television differ from continuities in the books based on the brand and cannot be intertwined.

In the webisode "New Ghoul at School," Frankie is a new student at Monster High School. She makes every effort to make new friends and fit in. She attempts to try out for the cheerleading team and makes the squad. However, in a different webisode, "Fear Squad," Frankie is stressed about cheerleading tryouts. The two episodes are discontinuous to the storyline. The two episodes cannot happen in the same realm;

however, it may seem as if it is an extension of the tryouts from the first episode. This same storyline is replicated in the television special of the same name *New Ghoul @ School* (Paden & Radomski, 2010). The special follows Frankie as a new student for her first week at Monster High School. She makes several attempts to get noticed and make friends. She eventually tries out for the Fear Squad, but comes into conflict with the captain Cleo.

In 2016, Mattel decided to reboot the Monster High franchise. Mattel lost the license to manufacture Disney Princess dolls and therefore changed the look of the physical and animated dolls in order to appeal to a younger audience. Instead of expanding and building on the existing storyline of *Monster High*, Mattel created a new origin story for the school. Originally, the audience is following the new student, Frankie Stein. Through Frankie's interactions, viewers meet other ghoulfriends like Draculaura and Clawdeen and learn stories about the school, monster history, and other monsters. In *Freaky Fusion* (Blais & Lau, 2014a), the monsters accidentally travel back in time to 1814, when Monster High School was built. Viewers also see the ancestors of the monsters like Victor Frankenstein. However, the reboot movie of the Monster High franchise, *Welcome to Monster High* (Donnelly & Reed, 2016), has a different origin story, which has Draculaura as the founder and creator of the school, along with Frankie Stein, Clawdeen and others as she finds them with a magical device. This story is similar to *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), where Dracula founded a hotel that becomes a safe space for monsters on vacation.

The narrative of *Monster High* is also fragmented. There are six volumes of webisodes on the official Monster High YouTube channel. The first four volumes have

an average of 20 to 30 webisodes. Volumes five and six each have less than 10 webisodes. The webisodes of volume one are random and provide a general introduction to the monsters of Monster High School. Audiences are introduced to Frankie Stein as a new student and experience the school day with her, meeting new monsters along the way. The webisodes of volume two began to follow a continuous storyline. Volume two begins with Cleo's frustration with the fearleading squad. As captain of the squad, Cleo becomes demanding and unbearable, which causes everyone to quit the team except Frankie. The storyline continues with each webisode building from the previous one. The story progresses as Frankie recruits new members for the squad, and eventually makes it to "Monster Mashionals" (the national championship). However, for volume three, the storyline is random again. Webisodes are not a part of a storyline and do not continue from the previous webisode. Then, in volume four, stories are told in a series of webisodes. For example, Jane Boolittle enters *Monster High* in the fifth webisode "Boo Ghoul at School." Her story continues to the next webisode, providing background about her abilities and her origin. Boolittle has separate adventures throughout volume four. She is typically shy and makes friends with the pets of the ghouls. The pets are also introduced in volume four and have separate storylines as well in "Creature Creepers pt. 1" and Creature Creepers pt. 2." So in volume four, there are a series of fragmented stories about individual monsters. Volumes five and six focus more on the monster-exchange students by introducing foreign monsters as distant cousins and having the main ghouls spend time in another country. The theme music introduction also changes by volume five. The theme song for the first four volumes begins with the original theme song articulated as a cheer, "M-O-N-S-T-E-R, Monster! Monster! Yes, We Are!" Then, a

rap about the ghouls follows the rest. However, the theme song for volume five and six begins with a singsong cheer, “We Are Monsters, We Are Proud, We Are Monsters, Sing It Loud.” It’s almost a mock rendition of James Brown’s 1968 song “Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.”

Other ways that the franchise is fragmented is through the characters and storylines from other regions. Each television special is associated with a particular volume of the webisodes. For example, in the television special *Frights, Camera, Action* (Blais &Lau, 2014b), the storyline is mostly away from the school. The characters travel to “Londoom” (London), “New Goreleans” (New Orleans), and “Hauntlywood” (Hollywood). As the ghouls travel to new locations, they interact with new monsters such as Clawdeen’s older sister, Clawdia, Honey Swamp from the Bayou, and Elissabat. These same characters are also introduced in the volume four webisodes. Other specials such as *Scaris: City of Frights* (Duncan, Mckenzie, & Paden, 2013) and *Boo York, Boo York* (Lau, 2015) are located in cities outside of the Monster High school realm. Even though, it is never stated whether the world of *Monster High* is in the United States, the events and locations often parody American culture and cities.

The commercials also add to the Monster High simulation. Some advertising only features the animated characters and their storyline, while other commercials feature human girls playing with Monster High dolls that imitate the characters. Van Raaij (1993) stated, “Advertising is a powerful tool to add hyperreality to mundane products and brands” (p. 556). In this sense, the viewer signifies the messages of the commercials. The dolls are viewed as products to be bought and played with in order to simulate the actions of the animated characters that represent the dolls. Again, it is noted that the

webisodes came before the dolls as marketing tools for the franchise. Then, that plays into the question of whether the dolls simulate the animations, or if the animations simulate the dolls.

Self-Reflectivity and Irony

In addition to numerous locations that mock the major American cities and large international cities, the Monster High universe consists of American symbols and codes. In the special *Ghouls Rule* (Fetterly & Sacks, 2012), the monsters are learning about the history of Halloween from a documentary. It is ironic that the history of the monsters and their parents derived from American horror films, many which were produced by Universal Studios. According to Baudrillard (2004), "(People) are so used to playing back every film-the fictional ones and the films of our lives-so contaminated by the technology of retrospection, that we are quite capable, in our present dizzy spin, of running history over again like a film played backwards" (p. 273). Media is used to create hyperreality within the simulation of images in the *Monster High* universe. Media and the *Monster High* characters are so intertwined with their world and culture that it is the same meaning and complements the "aesthetic worlding" of the animated series. Herhuth (2017) discussed "aesthetic worlding" as not only "the creation of diegetic time and space through cinematic and animation techniques" but also it is "the revision and creation of perceptual and conceptual rules and routines" (p. 30).

The characters are products of media and can only be explained with media. On the YouTube channel, there are videos that introduce the main ghoulfriends. For example, Draculaura's video is presented from a simulated web channel called Fright Tube, which replicates YouTube (Best of Draculaura, 2015). Lagoona is also shown on

Fright Tube and ends up with over six billion views after her video goes viral. Her image is also created into a meme, which are the graphics typically posted on Instagram or Facebook. The students also upload and post updates to their "Critter" (Twitter) accounts. The students are also connected to social media and the world through their iCoffin phones. It is suggested "that audiences actively construct meanings from media images that empower them with their particular social contexts" (Harms & Dickens, 1996, p. 217). Young consumers are able to identify with the signs within the shows and videos because they decode the meaning in relation to American culture.

Another instance of self-reflexivity is seen through the character HooDude. After feeling pressured for not having a boyfriend, Frankie decided to create HooDude (resembles a cross of a voodoo doll and a scarecrow). He is not considered real like the other monsters (who really are not real either but animated characters). Similar to Disney's famous puppet, Pinocchio, HooDude is innocent and child-like. He wanders around the school aimlessly and often confused at how things function. In "Undo the Voodoo," he decides to run for disembodied class president, but Heath Burns discourages and upsets HooDude:

Heath: (pointing at HooDude) "You? Student disembodied president? You're not even a real dude, dude!!!"

HooDude: "He's right. (sighs) I'll never be real." (Runs off crying)

HooDude is the metaphoric comparison to Pinocchio who was never accepted because he was not a real boy. In a school of ostracized monsters that emphasize unity and acceptance, HooDude is mocked and rejected by the students. Although, it is ironic that the animated characters do not accept HooDude as a real monster, yet they are not "real"

either. He is an animated "doll" just like the other animated dolls.

Postmodern "Mistaken" Identity and the Monster in Disguise

The same postmodern principles described previously are applied to the concept of identity in postmodern culture. Postmodern identity is fluid, fragmented, and always changing (Kellner, 1995). According to Baudrillard (1988), "Identity is untenable" and is likely to become incoherent and dissolve (p. 123). Jameson (1991) referred to the concept of identity as "schizophrenic" because it is affected by the multiplicity of meanings and signs that confused the formation of a singular identity (p. 26). Capitalism and consumerism contribute to the notion that identity is created and transformed by commodities such as fashion, cars, and other tangible products (Kellner, 1995). Since identity is socially constructed, postmodern theory can deconstruct the nature of identity with regard to gender and race.

Morowitz (2007) discussed one of the themes of the "monster"[4] shows was "mistaken identity," which involved role-playing and disguises. The use of disguises or lack of in order to conform to be normal demonstrates that "identity is fluid, not stable and people are often not what they seem to be…characters actually do transform into someone, or something else" (p. 51). Clawdeen transforms into a four-legged werewolf in order to defend herself or get away fast. Draculaura and other vampires can change into bats. Twyla, daughter of the Boogeyman, can become invisible and blend into the walls when she wants to be hidden. These attributes are more than just supernatural abilities but the ability to transform into something or someone else.

[4] Morowitz suggested that *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* produced in the mid-1960s served a critique of the suburban nuclear family, in response to the social movements of the 1960s.

Holt Hyde/ Jackson Jekyll is the offspring of the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde character. He is a representation of the duality of the monster and normality within the same person. Jackson Jekyll is one of the few human students, but transforms into a monster, Holt Hyde, when music is played. He has been living his life as a human and longed to be a monster like his cousin, Heath Burns (a fire elemental). Whenever he transforms, he has no recollection of memories of the events that either personality experienced, so he tries to keep a journal of the events to help him remember. In *Ghouls Rule* (Fetterly & Sacks, 2012), the monsters plotted to take revenge on the "normie" high school, but someone had already vandalized the school. In an effort to avoid the police, the monsters enter a Halloween party. The "normies" assume the monsters have on Halloween costumes. The police arrested Holt Hyde because it seemed that he vandalized the school but when his headphones were taken away, Holt transforms into human Jackson. The police officer sees Jackson and believes that the monster Holt must have escaped the jail cell and captured Jackson instead. The officer drops Jackson off at the "normie" high school and he seems to fit in with the humans. His identity is concealed because it cannot be seen physically.

There are two instances of mistaken identity in this film, the Halloween party and Holt/Jackson. The monsters are visibly hidden at a Halloween party because the humans assume that the monsters have costumes on. For Halloween, Americans use the holiday to wear masks and disguises to pretend to be someone or something else. The humans are wearing masks to pretend to be monsters. When they see the real monsters, they comment on how great and authentic the costumes are. In this sense, identity can be removed or applied with physical objects such as masks and clothing. The duality of Holt and

Jackson causes confusion among others that are unaware that they are the same person. Jackson fits in with the human students because they do not know that he is a monster. At Monster High school, he assumes his human identity. The other monsters know that he can transform into a monster, yet they do not fully accept him since he is part human. Another instance of mistaken identity is when Lagoona is informed to have her parents attend a parent-teacher conference. Lagoona believes that she may be in trouble or the teacher has bad news about her grades, so she panics. The ghouls convince the zombie, Slo Mo, to dress as her aunt to trick the teacher. The disguise is horrible considering Slo Mo is extremely tall and large in size like Lurch from the *Addams Family.* He wears a dress and heels and while viewers can clearly see Slo Mo, the teacher believes it to be Lagoona's aunt. Gender is attributed to dresses and jewelry, so that Slo-Mo becomes female with a change of clothing.

In the television special, *Electrified* (Falkenstein, Veilleux, & Zourelidi, 2017), Clawdeen wants to achieve her dream of opening a fashion salon. Because the salon is opened for humans, the monsters pretend to be in costumes for the human customers in the salon. The disguise is their actual appearance. It carries the Halloween theme so the monsters can conceal their identity from humans by pretending to be in costumes, just like humans pretend to be monsters in disguise for Halloween. Again, material objects signify identity and can be removed and interchanged.

Conclusion

Monster High displays a multitude of elements that are commonly associated with postmodernism, such as de-centering the subject, intertextuality, pastiche, transmedia storytelling, hyperreality and fragmentation, self-reflectivity and irony, and postmodern

identity. The series recycles the stories of horror monsters, historical references such as holidays and fictional works, and various images of pop culture in the form of intertextuality and pastiche. It is interesting that the series does rely on its audience to be media and culturally literate in order to connect historical references of the past with media images from the present. American signs and symbols are constantly intertwined in the series, yet the storyline about teenage monsters in high school is common enough to appeal to a global audience. Both the series and the viewer are postmodern in nature. The marketing practices, medium of consumption, and content of *Monster High* appeal to a postmodern consumer, which means that Mattel has to constantly re-adapt to changes in their appeal to young audiences. The reboot of the franchise in 2016 reinvented the story of *Monster High* in order to appeal to younger audiences, after the loss of the Disney Princess license.

Young viewers watch *Monster High* and interpret the series and characters based on their own experiences and knowledge; however, as postmodern consumers, I conclude that they perceive the show as pure fantasy. The general commonality among the monsters and viewers is age. The true interest in the show is not identification, but the attraction to animated characters attending school. Young viewers see the references to American culture and can recognize the mockery of such symbols and icons. The numerous monster puns break the realism of the series. The numerous monsters of *Monster High* also make audiences indifferent to one particular character. Therefore, the addition of monsters allows for viewers to remain emotionally disconnected to a particular character. The physical dolls become extensions of the hyperreality of *Monster High* and can become a figment of the child's imagination, where the child then changes

the postmodern identity of the doll. The series is entertainment for young children that can choose to watch on YouTube, televised specials, or even read the books.

MONSTER HIGH UNIVERSE AS A DYSFUNCTIONAL HETEROTOPIA

This chapter is an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and class through a postmodern theoretical lens that discusses the cultural and social context of the "ghoulfriends" of *Monster High* and explores the ways in which race and culture are coded within this utopic *Monster High* universe. Because race and gender are central to understanding *Monster High* and its characters, the series is examined as a heterotopia which simulates a utopia with alternative meanings. Foucault describe one principle of the heterotopia is the "place between two opposite poles…[that] have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state" (p. 335). Monster High School is positioned as the perfect society isolated from the chaotic world.

Cohen (1996) argued, "One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together…(therefore) a polysemy is granted so that a greater threat can be encoded" (p. 11). The multiple facets of *Monster High* characters are examined in reference to how their intersectional identities attribute to gender and racial discrimination within this heterotopian universe. Collins and Bilge (2016) refer to intersectionality as an "analytic tool" that addresses individual and societal issues that have been "shaped not by a single axis of social division…but by many axes that work together and influence each other" (p. 2). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) defined intersectionality as "the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings" (p. 57). This principle claims that many people do not have a unitary identity. There is a double or triple consciousness among people that have multiple identities,

therefore dealing with various layers of oppression to create a singular experience. While some scholars use intersectionality as a theoretical approach,[5] others, like Smith (2017) explain "intersectionality is a concept (a description of the experience of multiple oppressions, without explaining their causes) rather than a theory (which does attempt to explain the root causes of oppressions.)" Therefore, for this research, gender, race, alongside other intersecting identities are applied through the lens of postmodernism. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton (1996) credited postmodernism with "the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda" (p. 22). A postmodern lens can break down the intersections of identities of the monsters and examine how each axis encounters intersecting oppressions.

King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) asserted that race and gender have "superficially" assumed positive connotations in Disney films, which "affirm and empower difference and retain a significance force as a means of projecting fantasies, policing deviation, arranging hierarchies, grounding identities, and reinforcing exclusions" (p. 5). The television specials and webisodes of *Monster High* depend on the cross-referential staging and information circulated in Mattel's broader consumer marketplace of dolls, toy stores, and commercials in order for consumers to fully realize their meanings. In order to understand the physical dolls, children have to be dependent on the knowledge of the commercials, webisodes, and television specials that teach

[5] Kimberle Crenshaw often noted with the term intersectionality, in earlier works described it as an experience and concept, yet in later works uses it as a theoretical approach. Collins and Bilge (2016) discuss the concept as a tool.

audiences how to interact and socially play with the dolls. Difference and acceptance are emphasized in *Monster High* and I argue that the commodification of race and gender are present in the themes, narratives, imagery, and characters of *Monster High*.

Postmodernism and Gender

When reading Barbie or any doll as a media text, feminist scholars criticize areas of body image, gender roles, hyper-sexualization, lack of diversity, and the capitalistic nature of the doll (DuCille, 1994; Schwarz, 2005; Guerrero, 2008; Zaslow, 2012). Overall, no matter how independent or empowering the design of the doll, there is still the notion that a female can do whatever she desires but her beauty is still the most significant aspect about her. However, the projection of gender ideals and Barbie doll values can make women feel inferior if they cannot "achieve Barbie-esque characteristics" (MacDougall, 2003, p. 260). hooks (2012) discussed how media images of beauty and body ideals affect people's self esteem. The beauty ideals of a slim waist, large breasts, long, blonde hair, and light eyes are impressed upon young girls and women. hooks discussed the documentary *Good Hair* (2009) created by Chris Rock that explored how black women handle their hair and prefer the European look of straight hair rather than their own natural texture. However, hooks stated that even some white women might not fit these ideals and seek to re-create themselves in the likeness of Barbie, further damaging their self-esteem as well.

The themes of gender and femininity are often explored in reference to the influence of children, especially young girls and the messages that are socially constructed by media. Most researchers agree that most of the literature and media created for children mainly consist of patriarchal views of society (Trousdale &

McMillan, 2003). However, more studies are providing insight into how the messages actually influence young girls and how they may interpret the messages. Most children's tales have incorporated a patriarchal point of view. Women in stories are often perceived as passive, weak, and dependent on their male counterparts. However, there are many fairytales defined as feminist tales[6] that scholars have discovered and recovered. Feminist tales are not as popular and are overlooked in comparison to patriarchal tales. Even though, Trousdale and McMillian (2013) argue that fairytales do not determine "perceptions of gender," these stories should be analyzed because they present messages of gender norms and ideals much like other media influences such as television, advertising, films, print media, and music.

However, critics of feminism have argued that feminist theory is limited to white, middle-class women and does not acknowledge the struggles of race and class. Feminist theory has not been able to address diversity and different social experiences of all women; hence, it led to the development of feminist standpoint theories. Thornham (2005) argued that feminists have attempted to develop a way where differences between women and with women can be addressed. Therefore, feminism does not offer interpretations of experiences for women of different social classes nor ethnicities. Postmodern feminists dispute that there is a one true knowledge of the woman's experience and rather accept the notion that there are fragmented experiences of women. Thornham (2005) defined postmodern feminism as the notion where "sexual difference is no longer seen as a fundamental organizing category, but is replaced by the concept of

[6] A feminist tale consists of a female protagonist that does not conform to patriarchy and can independently solve problems and overcome obstacles. See the work of Barchers, 1990; Carter, 1990; Lurie, 1980; Minard, 1975; Phelps, 1978, 1981 about feminist tales.

multiple and shifting differences" (p. 28). Kostikova (2013) explained that "postmodernism considers the notion female not as an alternative to male but as a rejection of alternative understandings of that notion… more significant than the economic (and domestic) position of women" (p. 27). However, for animation and online media, different theories and concepts should be considered outside of feminism.

Toffoletti (2007) applied the concept of simulation to formulate a theory about the posthuman, especially related to technology and identity. She argued that Barbie is a "precursor to the posthuman; a type of plastic transformer who embodies the potential for identity to be mutable and unfixed" (p. 60). By using the concept of the cyborg, Toffoletti explained that the simulation allows for "the posthuman…to create new articulations of the subject that exceed dialectical thought, and the impact of such images on notions of identity, the body and selfhood" (p. 3). Similar to monsters, the cyborg blurs "the categories of nature, culture, organism and machine" which also challenges what is natural and normal (p. 21). Additionally, Rogers (2011) stated, "Barbie demonstrates that femininity is a manufactured reality (which) entails a lot of artifice, a lot of clothes, a lot of props" (p. 72). The cyborg (online identity) has become a way for redefining categories of gender, femininity, and human identity because while the person is real, the online identity is a simulation of a real person and femininity is produced from gendered material objects. This concept is useful for how *Monster High* characters also have conflicting human/ non-human identities.

Best and Kellner (1991) argued that feminism is useful for understanding "the construction of subjects within gender roles while postmodern theory forces us to attend to differences and heterogeneity between different individuals, groups, and positions" (p.

212). The latter is why the analysis of *Monster High* focuses on the intersections of identity through a postmodern lens and not limited to feminism. They further explained that postmodern theory provides awareness of the “constraints” that are connected to socioeconomic positions such as race, class, and gender (p. 213).

Postmodernism and Race/ Ethnicity/ Otherness

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), “Races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (p. 8). Race is considered a social construct that was created to justify the exploitation and discrimination of minority groups. Racial constructs justify slavery and colonialism. In the U.S., Congress created whiteness and attributed citizenship based on racial categories. Racial constructs denied people of color the social, political, and economic rights attributed to American citizenship, making them less than human, subhuman. This systemic discrimination dates back to the institution of the "one drop" rule (p. 148), where a person is considered Negro if they have a certain percentage of blood (DNA) of African American descent; however, scientists proved that there are no scientific and genetic differences among people of different racial categories.

During (2005) defined racism as “the belief that the human species is constituted by a number of separate and distinct biologically discrete sub-species: i.e. races” (p. 161). Scholars argued that the removal of racial markers (skin color) can circumvent racism but that leads to a colorblind or post-racial society. The notion that treating everyone equally and not seeing color is still considered a perpetuator of racism, instead of ending it. Not recognizing color minimizes the significance of diversity, cultural heritage, and unique perspectives. Colorblindness ignores any type of racial discrimination.

Author Richard Dyer (1997) discussed in his book *White* the visual media representations of white people. Race is not attributed to them and only to "others." Whites create the images of white people and portrayals in the media. White is considered the social norm. Non-whites are depicted in comparison of how they are not white and are different. Hall (1995) explained “the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the problem of race is understood to be” (p. 20). However, the positive and negative connotations associated with racial groups shift at differing times. Delgado and Stefanic described the historical depictions of Middle Eastern people by examining how racial identity is contextual in the following way:

> In one age, Middle Eastern people are exotic, fetishized figures wearing veils, wielding curved swords, and summoning genies from lamps. In another era, they emerge as fanatical, religiously crazed terrorists bent on destroying America and killing innocent citizens (2001, p. 9)

Anijar (2000) applied the concept of race to science fiction media and discussed how signifiers for race compare to the signifiers of species. The *Star Trek* series depicts different species as signifiers for race. Anijar explained that Klingons are one of the species in the *Star Trek* series that are encoded with an identity that “obscures and confuses ethnicity, race, and social class” (p. 155). Audiences of *Star Trek* construct an identity for the characters by connecting the species to historical and cultural stereotypical behaviors and attributes. Although *Star Trek* characters seem to be on a mission to establish unity in the intergalactic skies, Anijar argued, “aspects of a racist epistemology are rearticulated, buttressed, and reinforced” (p.154).

The Foundation of Postmodern Horror in *Monster High*

Collins and Bilge (2016) discuss how intersectionality can be used to describe power relations by identifying "four distinctive yet interconnected domains of power: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural" (p. 7). Mass media programming demonstrates cultural power that is used to influence and socialize society. This cultural power is created through the media narratives of films, television shows, music, books, and digital media. It is important to understand the cultural influence and messages of children's programming because media is a dominant part of the socialization of children.

By understanding the genre of the programming, it provides insight to understanding the cultural messages, context, and interpretations of the program. In her research, Pinedo (1997) outlines five characteristics of postmodern horror as opposed to classical horror: "1.) Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world, 2.) Horror transgresses and violates boundaries. 3.) Horror throws into question the validity of rationality, 4.) Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure, 5.) Horror produces a bounded experience of fear" (p. 17). *Monster High* incorporates each of the five characteristics in the various storylines of the shows along with other typical postmodern elements, but the characteristics are slightly modified for the purposes of children's horror. For *Monster High*, the modified characteristics are 1.) daily disruptions of deception and trickery, 2.) monstrosity in the form of disfigurement and oddity, 3.) acceptance of irrationality, 4.) uncertain or incomplete endings, and 5.) a fantasy escape interspersed with elements of fear restricted to a timed constraint. I argue that these modified characteristics of children's postmodern horror are the foundation of racial tensions, gendered narratives, and racial and gender identities in *Monster High*.

The storylines of *Monster High* resemble the soap opera format. Fiske (1987) argued, "Soap operas offer their subordinated women viewers the pleasure of seeing this status quo in a constant state of disruption" (p. 181). By combining horror disruption into a soap opera narrative, *Monster High* is able to produce gendered identities and representations of the ghoulfriends and their stories. Each webisode and TV special includes "a succession of obstacles and problems to overcome and the narrative interest centers on people's feelings and reactions as they live through a constant series of disruptions and difficulties" (Fiske, 1987, p. 181). Fiske (1987) also pointed out that "the de-centeredness of the soap opera form with its multiple reading positions is… the textual equivalent to a woman's role in family, repetition of plot themes equivalent to domestic work" (p. 198). The main ghoulfriends have to solve a problem or go on a mission every time in an effort to save someone, their school, or a particular cause.

Wood (2003) explained that the "basic formula" for the horror genre is the notion that "normality is threatened by the Monster." The formula explores the relationship between the monster and "normality," which is described as "the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them" (p. 71) and, in the case of *Monster High*, the "normies." The monsters violate boundaries of the human world. Pinedo (1997) explained that this violation is "…a two-fold manner: through the use of violence against other bodies…and through the disruptive qualities of its own body" (p. 21). However, for children's horror, violence is substituted for the disfiguration and oddity of the monster body and the blur between life and death.

Most times, the ghouls have to trust their instincts when faced with conflict. In a typical TV show or movie, authoritative figures and officials are rational beings that are respected and looked to as experts. However, in children's shows, people in authority, mostly adults, are portrayed as incompetent and unhelpful providing irrationality. In *Monster High,* authoritative officials often incite the conflict and increase tensions between monsters and humans.

In postmodern horror, the monster is victorious or "the outcome is uncertain," (Pinedo, 1997, p. 31). Since *Monster High* is about monsters, they will always succeed. Although the television specials have a narrative closure to the main problem, the webisodes do not have a definitive closure. While the main characters may have solved one issue, another issue arises that will either be resolved in the next episode or never mentioned again. The lack of true closure may also be a result of the time constraint of a webisode, which is typically a two to three minute video.

Lastly, *Monster High* takes a different approach to fear. As a children's program, the show and the characters are not violent. The emphasis is not violent fear but the fear of not being accepted, ostracized. Some humans and monsters are the antagonists, like Toralei, Cleo's sister, Nefera, and Van Hellscream (an administrator that acts as a human expert on monsters). The monsters clash against these antagonists. The antagonists often deceive and trick others which leads to scary and troubling situations for the other monsters. The viewers cheer for the main ghoulfriends to be triumphant and overcome their obstacles. The antagonists get their due justice by learning a lesson in unity and love, bringing everyone together regardless of their differences. The "bounded

experience" allows a young viewer to be easily entertained and enjoy comical depictions of animated monsters for the short amount of time.

Gender and Racial Identities in *Monster High*

The aforementioned characteristics of postmodern horror create the basis for gendered and racialized identities in *Monster High*. The frequent disruptions of each webisode or television special and the type of disruptions in the form of deception and trickery rely heavily on the gendered soap opera format of the program. The main characters are the ghoulfriends, all female characters of the high school. Location is important for the series in order for children to relate to the characters and the surrounding community. Pinedo's (1997) argument was that postmodern horror locates violence/ disruptions into contemporary life that relates to audiences. While Universal monster films (which Pinedo describes as classic horror) position the monster in distant lands with foreign accents, postmodern horror positions the monsters in today's society and locale. The ghouls of *Monster High* are typically shown at the centralized location of the high school or at someone's home, a domestic setting.

Sandler (1998) explained that "anthropomorphism" allows animated animals to perform human characteristics that are associated with gender (p. 158). King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argued that "anthropomorphizing" has a significant impact in animation by "endowing characters with personalities, and sexualized and racialized identities, which…shape the plot and animate the messages conveyed to the audiences" (p. 6). Female characters in animation are typically depicted within the domestic sphere as either hyper-sexualized beings or helpless maidens that need to be rescued (Sandler, 1998). The ghoulfriends are also hyper-sexualized, designed with thin bodies wearing

mini-skirts, high-heeled shoes, and glamourized with make-up and styled hair. Each ghoulfriend has a different stereotypical female interest such as fashion and make-up. Dobrow and Gidney (1998) explained that female animated character have "genderlects, or speech styles associated with women" (p. 116). These "genderlects" include "specialized vocabulary…empty adjectives…tag questions…[and] superpolite forms" (p. 111). The ghouls (female monsters) use this type of speech style when discussing fashion, boys, and telling stories and adventures. The monster lexicon also comes into play with "genderlects" when describing things as voltageous or fangtastic.

Disassembling Gender and the Cyborg

The main character of the series is Frankie Stein. Frankie serves as the main narrator at times. She is the "new ghoul" at Monster High and the audience is usually experiencing events through her eyes (Best of Frankie Stein, 2015). She is the daughter of Frankenstein and his bride; hence the green skin and black and white streaked hair. She is the most naïve and learns about the world by reading popular monster teen gossip magazines. She is actually only 15 days old, yet she has the appearance of a teenager. She also has different colored eyes, one green and one blue. Her body has stitches near her joints, around her neck, and right cheek. She has bolts in her neck that allow her to absorb electric charges to maintain body function. She has several monster abilities such as manipulating electricity, fire and time, magnetism, and body separation. Throughout several episodes and videos, Frankie creates and control electricity and often detaches parts of her body, either by accident or on purpose.

Frankie is similar to a cyborg, "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway, 1990, p. 205) and a "hybrid

figure…that blurs the category of human and machine" (Thornham, 2005, p. 33). She accidentally auditions for the "fear-leading squad" when she chases her hand, which becomes detached when she fell. The detachment of her hand is similar to "Thing" in *The Addams Family* (1964-1966). Morowitz (2007) argued that "Thing" is a severed hand that is a "dehumanized object" substituted for domestic help and representative of the "banished servant class" (p. 48). While "Thing" typically performed household chores such as answering the door and getting mail in *The Addams Family*, for Frankie, her hand assisted her in the audition for the cheerleading squad. Oftentimes, Frankie's body falls apart and she is seen re-attaching her hand or sewing up stitches. Pinedo (1997) argued postmodern horror engages in "the act of showing the spectacle of the ruined body" (p. 92). The "ruined body" happens to another character, Headless Headmistress Bloodgood. She is often seen without her head because it is unstable and not attached to her body. Many times, she either loses her head or misplaces it. The disassembled body parts constitute as violating boundaries, forcing the audience to realize that Frankie and Headmistress Bloodgood is a duality of life and death. The dismemberment of the body is also similar to Kilborne's argument that women's bodies are often dismembered in advertisements and it is a dehumanizing process that allows for a women's body to be objectified (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010). The disruptions where Frankie's body parts become detached by a mishap, the viewers are reminded that she is not real (human nor monster). Unlike Headmistress Bloodgood who is decapitated, Frankie is a creation and a simulation of what a female human or monster is supposed to be. Kilborne also points out that women are assembled and constructed together in advertisements through the use of photo editing software. The ideal woman in an advertisement may be composed of four

or five various body parts of different women, similar to the construction of Frankie, where she is composed of various body parts to create the ideal monster being. On one hand, the dismemberment of Frankie presents a message to viewers that no one is perfect and everyone, including monsters, has flaws. One of the main messages of *Monster High* is to "accept your freaky flaws." However, for young audiences, the presentation of unattainable body images can lead to body-hatred, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010).

Female Masculinity

Sandler (1998) determined that animal characters are coded as male unless female characteristics appeared. Sandler used the example of Bugs Bunny wearing a dress as a case for temporarily changing the character from male to female. The Disney movie *Mulan* (1998) is another example of challenging the binary examples of male and female, where the female characters assumes the identity of a man in order to enlist in the military (Limbach, 2013). For characters that simply dress up to simulate a different gender resembles a "performance of drag," which Butler (1990) stated "…plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (p. 337). A gendered performance represents how fluid gender is within postmodern shows and animation.

In chapter three, I discussed how Slo-Mo, a large male zombie, disguised himself as Lagoona's aunt to trick the teacher. This mistaken identity concept also applies to gender fluidity, where gender is interchangeable and attributed to clothing, costumes, make-up, and gendered mannerisms. This is problematic because the show is perpetuating a message that misconstrues Butler's argument about gender performance.

When materialistic objects like high-heeled shoes and a necklace become signifiers of feminine gender, it reinforces the stereotypes and norms of a hegemonic society that determines masculinity and femininity, and if an individual deviates from this, then they are not normal; they are monstrous. If a character has physical characteristics that are not stereotypical of a certain gender, then they are perceived as unusual or different.

For example, Abbey Bominable became a new addition to the ghoulfriends as a foreign exchange student. She is the daughter of a Yeti, or the abominable Snowman, who is ape-like and lives in the mountains, yet has never been discovered. She has an ambiguous Slavic accent and English is her second language. Snowflakes surround her and she has the ability to produce snow, ice, and frost if needed. She can use ice to create bridges and walls and to freeze objects. She also seems to be very strong and can lift heavy objects naturally (Best of Abbey Bominable, 2015). Her supernatural strength is deemed unusual to most of the other monsters, especially the male monsters. She is competitive, strong, and detached from emotions.

Abbey exhibits Halberstam's (1998) theory of female masculinity, which separates gender (masculinity) from sex (male), and the research presented examples of females who refused to conform to social expectations of femininity. Halberstam (1998) explained, "Female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (p. 1). Abbey's strength is always questioned and compared to other male monsters and if she seems to be stronger than another male monster, then others start to ostracize her. Throughout the entire series, she attempts to fit in by learning how to be more feminine in her appearance and characteristics. Her attempts to be accepted, to normalize her

femininity, demonstrate the postmodern characteristic of fear of not being accepted. Her particular character is presented as "non-normal" in two ways: as a foreign exchange student with an accent and exhibiting female masculinity. While she is accepted in the group of the main ghoulfriends, she is still considered an outsider and is often absent in many of the storylines. Young girls that are more adventurous, love outdoor activities, have a high interest in sports, or are competitive athletes may relate to Abbey. However, Abbey's female masculinity is not embraced by most of the monsters and that sends a message to young viewers that they will have similar experiences if they do not conform to the hegemonic ideal of femininity, like the other ghoulfriends.

Brown Is Different From Other Colors

Another main character of the ghoulfriends is Clawdeen Wolf, who is the daughter of the Wolfman. Her appearance has gold eyes, fangs, claws, and brown fur. She is described having "a thigh-skimming skirt, sky high boots and heavy makeup, and spends her days waxing, plucking, and shaving" (McKay, 2011). She regularly waxes and shaves because her hair grows back so quickly. She dislikes the excessive hair, since hairiness is a male characteristic. Historically, werewolves are man-like beasts and deemed mythical due to the belief that they were not actual monsters but shape-shifted predators (Clasen, 2012). There is no significant change in appearance when she transforms as a werewolf on all four legs, just the absence of clothing.

Her brown furry appearance creates the presumption that she is the African American character of the group. Although she does not have definitive African American markers, some of the characteristics and interests of her siblings indicate some stereotypical behaviors. Dobrow and Gidney (1998) explained, "Language is a powerful

means of signaling social and personal identity…our speech can provide indications of our age, ethnicity, gender identity, region of origin, and socioeconomic status" (p. 107). Their research examined dialects, linguistic features, and gender/ racial identifiers in children's animated programming. Clawdeen Wolf and her werewolf siblings often use slang terms like "nah" or "bro" and leave the "g" off present participle verbs (i.e. grantin' wishes).

Her brother Clawd is the captain of the basketball team but he is also good at other sports too. His athleticism is indicative of stereotypes associated with African Americans. The media typically reinforces "positive" stereotypes of African Americans, where they are mostly seen as "athletes, singers, comedians, [and] actors" (Campbell, 1995, p. 95). Catty Noir, a werecat, similar in features to the werewolves, is a famous singer that transfers to Monster High School. She is a black werecat with hot pink hair and pink eyes to match. She decided to attend the school to evade the paparazzi and the continuous cycle of harsh criticism. The reasoning for leaving her career behind is not to focus on her education, but just to have some time for herself, out of the public eye. Campbell (1995) argued that it is evident that the "mythical thinking of many white Americans [is] blacks have a 'natural' ability to compete as athletes but not a 'natural' ability to lead and direct teams" (p. 63). The notion that diversity is limited to the world of entertainment is reflected in how the teachers and administrators of *Monster High* are pale-skinned and alluding to a white archetype, while student monsters like Clawd or Catty Noir have darker color tones and play sports, sing, or dance.

Pimentel and Velázquez (2009) examined the racial discourse of *Shrek 2* embedded in the physical appearance, accents, and interaction among the main characters

Shrek, Donkey, and Puss-in-Boots. They note a particular scene that parodies the television program, *COPS*. Within the scene, the characters steal something and as they escape, the "police" search them and find a small bag (catnip) on Puss-in-Boots. There are a few antagonists in *Monster High*, such as Toralei (a werecat), Nefera (sister of Cleo de Nile), and Moanica (a conniving zombie). Toralei is a shown as sneaky, scheming, and vengeful werecat that is always at odds with the main ghoulfriends. Her backstory is reported as a "Monster High True Stories" report serving as a parody of *E! True Hollywood Stories*. She is depicted as a criminal, running and hiding in the shadows with a police spotlight following her. This scene and the referenced scene of *Shrek 2* perpetuate the dominant discourse of racial profiling of Latinos and African Americans as criminals and drug dealers and users. It is important to distinguish that the racialized characters have brown or darker complexions and are typically of the werecat or werewolf family, zombies, or associated with a specific ethnicity such as Egyptian.

Geisha Doll Meets Dragon

A minor character, who befriends the ghoulfriends, is Jinafire Long. She is a dragon that has the appearance of a Geisha doll. She has yellow eyes, yellow scaly skin, black and green streaked hair and a dragon tail with a green tip. She either wears a multi-colored top with red pants or a burgundy kimono. Her eyes are not heavily slanted, but most of the female monsters have almond shaped eyes that can appear slanted or exotic in some way. She has a heavy "Orient" accent and "Orient" music plays whenever she speaks. Her voice and mannerisms are soft and elegant. Uchida (1998) stated, "The stereotype of the Oriental Woman as exotic, submissive, and subservient, or sinister, treacherous, and lecherous still predominates," (p. 167) which is depicted in Jinafire's

character. Uchida added, “The term Oriental takes on the connotation of exoticism and difference, presuming that all Asians were a homogenous group as members of a monolithic Oriental culture” (p. 161). Although Jinafire identifies as Chinese, her character portrays Pan-Asian culture, shown with accented English, Asian clothing and colors, and the use of “Orient” music in the background of her storylines.

In the webisode “Tough as Scales,” Jinafire is in a class setting with mostly male monsters. The guys are playing around and tussling with a basketball that inadvertently breaks a window and falls into a well. Jinafire and the guys go into the well to try to retrieve the basketball that has fallen below a manhole cover. However, she uses her intellect to redirect the water in the well to force the ball out of the manhole. Throughout this webisode, the guys are arguing and talking loudly over her, even ignoring her when she tries to interject her ideas. Tajima (1989) discussed how portrayals of Asian women are typically limited to the Lotus Blossom (subservient and docile) or the Dragon Lady (cunning and deceitful). Jinafire is depicted as a hybrid of the two archetypes resembling a “doll” and a dragon.

Darrell Hamamoto (1994) expressed, “Asians or Asian-Americans, when represented at all, they exist primarily for the convenience and benefit of the Euro-American lead players” (p. 206). Each character introduced in the *Monster High* series has a storyline that focuses on their obstacles and successes; however, Jinafire’s introduction was more of a service to the male monsters. She is not interested in basketball. Jinafire and the other students are in a welding class. She has created a basketball stand and Duece thanks her for the stand. Jinafire replied, “It was a honor using my talents to help commemorate your friends’ accomplishments.” She took the

liberty to gift the others with something that she made in class. Then, she offers to retrieve the basketball when they lose it. She is "superpolite" and easy to accommodate to others. It is problematic that her character exists to serve others. In *Scaris: City of Frights* (Duncan, Mckenzie, & Paden, 2013), Jinafire is situated with the "ghouls" for the majority of the movie and is more helpful and seemingly an equal, rather than a servant. However, once she meets Heath Burns, she reduces back to the object of affection for Heath, whose character reflects the dominant white heteronormative ideal. Uchida (1998) argued that these storylines and portrayals are problematic for "Asian American women also find themselves in a double bind, caught between the pressure to become Orientalized, to conform to the expected image, and the need to reject the Orientalization and the degrading image" (p. 172).

Hamamoto (1994) argued, "so long as network television maintains its structural relationship to the inner workings of oligopoly capitalism, this is little hope that Asian American representations will change for the better" (p. 207). This supports Said's (1978) argument that Orientalism is a "body of theory and practice" and "a system of knowledge about the Orient… into Western consciousness," that is financed, mass produced, and distributed by Western institutions (p. 6). *Monster High* designer Rebecca Shipman created Jinafire based on her travels of Asia. While one can assume the designer wanted to honor Chinese culture, however, Jinafire is the materialization of Asian culture interpreted by an American designer influenced by Western Oriental images.

Monster-Normie Relations and Racial Tensions in *Monster High*

The entire concept of the *Monster High* series is about creating a space for monsters to be themselves and be accepted by everyone. Monster High School is located

in a fictional town New Salem that provides a safe space for the monsters. The school serves as a fantasy place that is a monster utopia, unaffected by the larger dominant culture of humans. *Monster High* universe is a counter-culture that is not conforming to the rest of society, yet the isolation of their world is not a victory for inclusion. For postmodern media, Hill (2012) stated, "Difference is allowed, celebrated, and commodified" by portraying the "sexual and ethnic nature within the structure [and play] of the text" (p. 96). The main theme of *Monster High* is to celebrate and welcome monsters from all walks of life. But who is privileged as the welcoming party? Is the welcome for everyone or only those that fit into the monster convention of normal?

Jameson (2005) contended, "The utopian calling, indeed, seems to…bear some necessary combination of the identification of a problem to be solved and the inventive ingenuity with which a series of solutions are proposed and tested" (p. 11). So a utopian society is created as a form of resistance to hegemonic culture. Jameson added, "Utopians, whether political, textual or hermeneutic, have always been manics and oddballs" (p. 10). As explained within both *Monster High* narratives (the original version and the 2016 reboot), the school was created for monsters that were in hiding and did not fit into human society. Along the many adventures of the ghouls, they meet new monsters that are unhappy and isolated and encourage them to join the school to be "accepted." The school seems to be the perfect solution for all monsters. Jameson explained, "The Utopian vocation can be identified…by the persistent and obsessive search for a simple, a single-shot solution to all our ills" (p. 11). This "vocation" is repeatedly cited in every webisode, TV special, commercial, and music video about *Monster High,* but the integration of monsters with different backgrounds has its challenges. In contrast,

Foucault (1997) described a utopia as a "society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and in any case utopias are spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal" (p. 332). Foucault contended that realized utopias are heterotopias in which "all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are…represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable" (p. 332). Foucault listed several principles to describe heterotopia; however, for *Monster High*, the school is presented as an open-closed system of entrance and isolation similar to the fifth principle. While Foucault's fifth principle corresponded to mental institutions and prisons where subjects are "forced…or one must submit to rites of purification…[or] only enter by special permission" (p. 335), the students of *Monster High* are mostly invited to attend by one of the ghoulfriends. In the 2016 reboot, Draculaura used a magical tool to seek out and select students for the school. Since the monster society has yet to be integrated with "normie" society, is it a utopian reality or separatist society? The following section serves as a discussion of how *Monster High* operates as a dysfunctional heterotopia filled with racial tensions and prejudice that minimizes the intersectional identities and conflicting relationships of its participants.

Racial Microaggressions

Race is problematic for animation. Racism is non-existent in most animated films by the exclusion of other ethnicities or by bridging the cultures through love. For example, the Tarzan story has elements of "white supremacy, Eurocentric rendering and masculine desire clichés;" however, Disney chose to retell the story and avoid controversy by eliminating race altogether (King et al., 2010, p. 21). Lindvall and Fraser

(1994) argued "the nature of the cartoon is the portrayal of physical characteristics, usually outlining with humorous hyperbole the distinctive qualities of a person or groups, especially ethnic groups" (p. 122). Wood (2003) argued that ethnic groups within the dominant culture are accepted for two reasons: "Either they keep to their ghettos and don't trouble us with their otherness, or they behave as we do and become replicas of the good bourgeois" (p. 67). Instead of overtly displaying racist sentiments and behaviors, microaggressions, in the form of derogatory words, insults, and hostile actions, imply racial tensions between different groups. Cappiccie et al. (2012) guided an oppositional analysis of Disney films with racial characters and concluded that the film "[made] use of microaggressions to routinely oppress multicultural and minority groups…[and the themes of the film] support racial dynamics such as hierarchy, domination, and oppression" (p. 50). Morowitz (2007) argued that during the 1950s (at a time that catalyzed racial tensions), "The monsters served as a convenient stand in for blacks and ethnic minorities…the attributes of these monsters allowed them to serve as symbolic substitutes for the outsiders attempting to invade the idyllic suburbs" (p. 39). As it relates to *Monster High*, the ghoulfriends and other monsters either remain isolated or try to assimilate to seem "normal."

Generally, in media studies, normative American identity is portrayed as WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). For *Monster High*, racial, ethnic and national representations are comparative to multicultural identities in American culture. Common markers such as language, accents, clothing, and multi-colored appearance signify racial, ethnic, and cultural representations. The "normies" represent whiteness in America, while the monsters represent minorities in America. Similar to the use of the term "savage" for

Native Americans in *Pocahontas* (Cappiccie et al., 2012), "normies" is the derogatory term used by the monsters for humans. Wood (2003) provided the example of the relationship between the Puritan settlers and the Indians to explain their use of the term "savage" as a way to reject "any perception that the Indians had a culture, a civilization, of their own." He further argued that the Puritans viewed the Indians as "devils or the spawn of the Devil" which then is projected "…on to the Other of what is repressed within the Self in order that it can be discredited, disowned, and if possible annihilated" (p. 66). Similarly, monsters in *Monster High* signify as the "other" identity. Although the human race is diverse and multicultural, the "normies" seen on *Monster High* signify white identity, an oppressive group that has repressed and ostracized the monsters, forcing them to create the school as a safe space.

In *Ghouls Rule* (Fetterly & Sacks, 2012), the approach of Halloween has monsters and humans feeling apprehensive about the holiday. Assuming that Holt Hyde (Jackson's human form) is responsible for defacing the normie high school, the humans choose to punish him. The sheriff holds a press conference saying that monsters should be put in their "places" and the criminal will be given the "Trick or Treatment" (similar to a public death execution). It seems extreme for a children's animated series to even suggest a death sentence for defacing school property. By suggesting that punishment should be used to keep the monsters "in their place" is the same rhetoric and violent action taken by oppressive groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to persecute African Americans. [7]

Audiences never see or know the events that caused the monsters to go into hiding

[7] Horn's book *Invisible Empire; the Story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871*, quotes Nathan Bedford Forrest 'That's a good thing; that's a damn good thing. We can use that to keep the niggers in their place" (p. 314-315). In reference to the Ku Klux Klan and lynching.

in the first place. They only see human reactions towards the monsters. The majority of the monsters seem to want to rectify the past and move toward a nostalgia that never existed. When discussing the series, *The Munsters*, Morowitz (2007) pointed out "the major theme of the series: the constant oscillation between the Munsters' desires to fit in and their ultimate inability to do so" (p. 35). She furthered argued that shows such as *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* "allowed middle-class viewers to measure themselves against a far more eclectic, if slightly monstrous, model and offered an option to blind conformity while acknowledging its power" (p. 36). Throughout the series, humans are rarely seen or discussed, and when humans are present, they are not interested in being a part of monster society. The humans only tolerate monsters when they can benefit from their fashion designs, hairstyles, and other material or cultural objects.

Cappiccie et al. (2012) pointed out that one underlying theme of *The Lion King* "is not to promote diversity but to control it" or at least contain it (p. 50). They further elaborate that if the outcasts are not contained, then "their dysfunction will quickly infect the rest of the polity, destroying the hegemonic circle of life…a metaphor for justifying a prototype of White privilege" (p. 51). One webisode shows a new substitute teacher in the class. He appears to be a white middle age man named Mr. Lou Zarr, which the students pronounce as loser. He demands respect and states that he is the authority in the class. Deuce is late for class. The teacher demands Deuce take off his sunglasses and the hood of his jacket. Deuce complies and the snakes from his head appear, his eyes glow, and he instantly turns the teacher to stone. Although Deuce and the other classmates are aware of the reasons for the sunglasses, his actions are an example of a resistance to authority. His actions are also a reason why the monsters are perceived as a threat,

disrespecting authority and not controlling his powers.

Interspecies (Racial) Relationships

Before the 1970s, there were limited media depictions of interracial couples due to the law that considered miscegenation illegal.[8] Current depictions of interracial couples are either invisible, present an ideal post-racial world where everyone gets along or ignores any type of discrimination that the minority character of the relationship may face. King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) explained that the notion of interracial couples and racial harmony project a superficial universal "truth: love bridges cultures and dissolves differences" (p. 21). Additionally, *Monster High* emulates Wells' (2008) argument, "Cross-species coupling is an endemic and unnoticed currency of the animated cartoon—innocent, innocuous, banal—or looked at another way, shocking, boundary-pushing, camp, queer, subversive" (p. 4). Two main relationships in *Monster High* signify the duality of innocent love and subversive behavior.

In the first volume of the *Monster High* webisodes, Gil and Lagoona Blue have difficulties with their relationship. Gil is a freshwater river creature and Lagoona is a saltwater sea creature. Lagoona is the daughter of the sea creature from the Black Lagoon. Her parents are monsters from the 1954 movie *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. She is the captain of the swim team and concerned about the aquatic environment. Her body is covered with blue scales and she has webbed hands and fins that protrude from her body (Best of Lagoona Blue, 2015).

[8] Interracial marriage was illegal in the United States until the 1967 court case Loving Vs. Virginia overturned the ruling

Gil's parents forbid him to be with Lagoona, forcing him to end the relationship. She even refers to him as a "freshwater boy" that could never understand what she physically and emotionally goes through. Scientifically, saltwater and freshwater animals can rarely co-exist but for the purposes of animation, Gil wears a water helmet in order to survive on land. In *13 Wishes* (Duncan, Paden, & Sacks, 2013), Howleen, Clawdeen's younger sister, is granted 13 wishes from a genie. She used one of the wishes to temporarily change Lagoona from a saltwater creature to a freshwater creature. Although Gil's parents are never shown, Lagoona is thrilled to finally have their approval of her. Her transformation parallels Ariel's conversion in *The Little Mermaid*, becoming human to impress a man. Giroux and Pollack (2010) argued, "Although girls might be delighted by Ariel's teenage rebelliousness, they are strongly positioned to believe, in the end, that desire, choice and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving a handsome man" (p. 105). Lagoona wanted to become a freshwater creature to gain the approval of Gil's parents. Their disapproval is based on physical attributes and not the personality nor characteristics of Lagoona. Eventually, Lagoona changes back to saltwater creature but the fact that her character transformed in the first place perpetuates the notion that females should accommodate their partner's needs and desires. Throughout many of the episodes, she often compromises for Gil and his parents' wishes to appease them. This is problematic for both boys and girls and their understanding of relationships, interpreting that the female should always compromise and appease the male and his family.

Another main romantic relationship in *Monster High* is between Draculaura (vampire) and Clawd (werewolf). Draculaura has pale skin and is mostly purple and pink in color. Her vampire-like features consist of fangs, pointed ears, and sensitivity to the

sun. She was saved and adopted by Dracula due to an outbreak of a disease. She has powers but limitations that include intolerance to garlic, no reflection in the mirror and, since she does not drink blood, she is considered a vegan. The vegan connotation delineates how she is to be perceived as a "good" vampire instead of an "evil" one.

There is tension from the other monsters when the two begin dating. In the series, there is a history of tension between vampires and werewolves. Vampires have been culturally associated with power and immortality (Clasen, 2012). Auerbach (1995) argued, "Vampires oscillate between aristocracy and democracy, at times taking command with elitist aplomb, at times embodying the predatory desires of the populace at large" (p. 7). The vampires in *Monster High* exhibit a superiority complex over the other monsters, especially the werewolves. In another TV special, *Frights, Camera, Action* (Blais &Lau, 2014b), a villainous vampire named Stoker cons Draculaura to pretend to act as the vampire queen. Stoker plans to maintain "vampire supremacy" and rejects the notion of monster equality. He also condemns monster "intermingling," which is weakening the power of vampires.

The "Hisstoria" webisode showed the past relations between vampires and werewolves. There were vampire-only restrooms and rumors that werewolves carried diseases. Vampires affirm that werewolves should not forget their "place." In the *Fright On* special (Dal Chele, Gimeno, & Paden, 2011), the ghouls attend the movie premiere of *Twi-Hard 4: Abs of Intrigue*, where other monsters (mostly vampires and werewolves) start whispering, staring, and laughing at the sight of Clawd and Draculaura:

Frankie: "Why are they looking at Draculaura"

Clawd: “Cause she’s with me, they don’t believe that our kind should be friends. That’s why they go to Vampire and Werewolf schools only.”

The *Fright On* special (Dal Chele, Gimeno, & Paden, 2011) specifically centers on the challenges of merging different monsters together. The school congregates in the auditorium for a major school announcement. The school board decided to expand Monster High by allowing students from the vampire only academy (Belfry Prep) and the werewolf only academy (Crescent Moon). The headmaster announces:

Headmistress Bloodgood: “Starting Monday, we will be opening our doors to the vampires of Belfry Prep and werewolves of Crescent Moon High.”

[Students gasps]

Draculaura: “Other werewolves?”

Clawd and Clawdeen (in unison): “Other vampires?”

Headmistress Bloodgood: “The merging of our schools is the first step in a much larger goal, a merging of all monster schools, and eventually normie society. The overall goal of the merger is to unite all monsters but also expand and become a part of normie society.”

Tensions grow stronger when the Administrator Van Hellscream stirs up trouble by spreading rumors and further dividing the monsters with microaggressions. He encouraged students to create cultural groups like “Were Pride” for the Werewolves and “Vampowerment” for the vampires. The historical and present context of the relationship between werewolves and vampires mirror the racial tensions during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. From a visual standpoint, it replicates the binary categories of race as black (werewolves) and white (vampires), “us” versus “them” complex.

Considering that vampires are deemed superior, it positions werewolves as an

inferior group. The integration of the two schools imitates Grant's (1916) position that "an individual of inferior type or race may profit greatly by good environment, [however] a member of a superior race in bad surroundings may, and very often does, sink to an extremely low level" (p. 98).

After learning about the administrator's plan, the ghoulfriends try to stop him and unify the school again. The ghouls confront Van Hellscream and ask why he wants to divide the school:

Van Hellscream: "I have spent my life making sure monsters didn't get along with each other. Stoking the fires of distrust between vampires and werewolves, between fresh water monsters and seawater monsters, Minotaurs and centaurs."

Howleen: "Why? Why would you do that?"

Bloodgood: "Because he's afraid. He thinks that as long as monsters are fighting each other, they wouldn't be any threat to the humans."

Van Hellscream: "That's right, but Monster High was working. Monsters were embracing their uniqueness and uniting. When I heard the superintendents were thinking of making every school like Monster High and then, one day, even allowing monsters to go to school with normies, I knew I had to stop it!"

Pinedo (1997) stated, "The realm of rationality represents the ordered, intelligible universe that can be controlled or predicted. In contrast, the irrational represents the disordered, ineffable, chaotic, and unpredictable universe that constitutes the underside of life" (p. 22). She contrasted how classic horror uses science and authoritative force to ensure social order and "the postmodern narrative is generally unable to overcome the irrational, chaotic forces of disruption" (p. 22). However, for *Monster High*, the

authorities are depicted as the ones causing the disorder, creating tensions between everyone. The students are the voice of reason while seeking fairness and justice, while adults are depicted as irrational, incompetent, and unjust. The special ends with the ghouls confronting Van Hellscream at the school dance and Duece turns him into stone with his eyes. All the monsters get along and dance together at the school dance. Van Hellscream may be one person but he expresses the beliefs of the latent human society that ostracized monsters. The monsters manage to resolve main issues and conflicts in the *Monster High* TV specials, but the disruptions and tensions are still constant in the *Monster High* universe in general.

Critiquing the Notion of 'Normalcy': Interspecies OstRacism

Pinedo (1997) contended, "Horror exposes the terror *implicit* in everyday life: the pain of loss, the enigma of death, the unpredictability of events, and the inadequacy of intentions" (p. 39). So, terror can take on multiple meanings for audiences when applied to daily life occurrences, especially for children. While loss, death, and uncertainty are things that children may grapple with, bullying and cyber bullying are main concerns for school-age children. In *Monster High*, the monsters are not accepted by humans, which is what prompted the creation of the school, but some monsters are ostracized by other monsters for not fitting the "normal" monster standard. The series allows children to experience the terror of bullying and its negative physical and emotional affects through the lives of several monsters. Children can experience bullying, rejection, and prejudice through the storylines of hybrid monsters, circus freaks, and zombies.

Hybrid Monsters. There are multiple types or species of monsters attending Monster High School. Adding a layer to the discussion of interspecies relationships leads

to discussions about mixed species (hybrid) monsters. A hybrid monster has two or more "scaritages" (play on heritage). A hybrid monster is the result of an interspecies relationship.

In the early 20th century, eugenicist Madison Grant (1916) discussed the politics of race purity, race preservation, the affects of immigrants and other inferior races. He argued, "The result of the mixture of two races…gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized and lower type. The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian…white man and a Negro is a Negro" (p. 17-18). Although Grant's argument was for eugenics, mixed races are still perceived negatively and coded for one race or the other, rarely both. Bolatagici (2004) explained, "Hybridity reveal[s] elements of contradiction and conflict within cultures and essentially individuals. Rather than presenting difference as destructive, hybridity represents coexistence" (p. 77). The concept of coexistence is the dominant interpretation of *Monster High*; however, a negotiated interpretation mimics Orbe and Strother's (1996) semiotic analysis of Alex Haley's *Queen*. The researchers discuss three signifiers for the tragic mulatto: "bi-ethnicity as (a) beautiful, yet threatening, (b) inherently problematic, and (c) leading to insanity," which is depicted in the hybrid monsters (p. 113).

In the *Freaky Fusion* (Blais & Lau, 2014a) special, audiences learn more about the history of Monster High School, but are also introduced to hybrid monsters, Neighthan Rot (zombie-unicorn boy), Bonita Femur (a moth-skeleton girl), Avea Trotter (a purple-skinned harpy-centaur girl), and Sirena Von Boo (a mermaid ghost). Our introduction to the hybrids is through Frankie's infatuation with Neighthan. She is physically attracted to his beauty and uniqueness. The other hybrids also exhibit a sense

of exoticism, beauty, and mystery that separates them from other monsters. The hybrids remain isolated because they have never been accepted and are often bullied. *Monster High* mimics mainstream media by perpetuating the message that interspecies couples and their children will face harsh criticism and prejudice in society. Their hybridity has been problematic for the four monsters causing them to move to eight different schools.

Later in the movie, the ghoulfriends have a mishap while time traveling from the past to the present. Eight ghouls fuse together becoming four new fusion monsters (promoting the new Freaky Fusion doll line). The fused monsters are Jinafire/Lagoona, Robecca/Dracalaura, Clawdeen/Venus, and Cleo/Toralei. According to the Monster High website (Mattel, Inc., 2018), the premise of the movie: "Unable to control their new freaky fusion bodies, they welcome the help of the new Hybrid students at Monster High who teach them 'howl' to coordinate both halves of their monster flaws!" The new fused monsters cannot handle their duality and exhibit internal conflict. As explained by Orbe and Strother (1996), "The paradigmatic signifiers (beautiful, yet threatening; inherently problematic; destined for insanity) work toward the only possible outcome: self-destruction" when characters deal with multi-ethnicity (p. 121). The fused monsters are so frustrated with their combined powers that they continuously fight, bicker, and display insanity. The hybrid monsters help them navigate and adjust to their new fused identity. Of course, for the ending, the ghouls return to normal and learn to accept and understand the complex nature of the hybrid monsters. While *Monster High* delves into the complexity of monster identity, the hybrid monsters still remain a marginalized group that is omitted from most of the other webisodes and specials.

Circus Freaks. Often in animation, the use of animals and their behaviors mimic

depictions of human incompetence. Gehlawat (2010) suggested that it is problematic "when (human) characters become animals [because] it is seen as reflecting some character flaw" (p. 418). He further discussed how animated character transformations such as Pinocchio to a donkey, the Beast from a man, and Tiana to a frog are perceived negatively while animal to human transformations improve their quality of life. Gehlawat (2010) argued that Princess Tiana as a frog "is the representation of a black girl as an animal, or the conflation of blackness with bestiality" (p. 418). Wells (2008) described the transformation of the Beast in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* as "animal metamorphosis" and argued, "it occurs in a way that privileges cross-species engagement, cross-dressing, gender-shifting, and the performance of identity…as a vehicle to play with contemporary issues" (p. 66). While the animal/ human transformations are performed by magic and temporary, *Monster High* displays the transformation as a part of the natural identity, offering a dual identity.

In *Escape from Skull Shores* (Ball & Duncan, 2012), a human named Barlteby Farnum (a play on P. T. Barnum) needs strange and unique creatures for his travelling circus-like shows. He is seeking a reclusive beast that he hopes will become a major attraction for his show. He inadvertently rescues the shipwrecked stranded ghoulfriends and takes them to the island Skull Shores. There, he isolates Frankie in order to lure the beast of the island and capture him. During a festive presentation, the beast appears and "kidnaps" Frankie. The beast is a very large creature that roars and frightens everyone. By the next morning, it is then revealed that the beast is really a lonely young monster that transforms when angry. Once Frankie talks with the beast, Andy, she realizes that he is just like her and other monsters. Wood (2003) described this realization as common

theme of the "double," in which "the protagonist learns to recognize (or at the very least is haunted by a suspicion of) his identity with the figure he is committed to destroying" (p. 92). Frankie brings Andy back to Monster High and asserts that he will fit it but he is cautious that if the monsters find out his truth, they will not accept him. He has been an outsider all of his life because of his ability to transform into a beast. The storyline perpetuates the male reform narrative in which Frankie is the "virtuous heroine" that can transform the beast into an ideal companion (Dickens, 2011, p. 80). Because anger and fear transform Andy into a beast, he learns to suppress it with Frankie's help, compromising his identity in order to fit in.

Meanwhile, Farnum is determined to capture Andy for his circus show. The human assistant Kipling decides to hinder Farnum and throws him into a tar pit. Kipling reveals that he is also an outcast and uncovers his large deformed elephant-like ears. Andy and Kipling are among other outcasts that demonstrate abnormal "freakish" qualities. In *Monster High*, the abnormal traits are mostly associated with the circus. The "Freak du Chic" webisodes associate the monsters to circus freaks. The main ghouls decide to hold a circus fundraiser to help the arts program at the school. Gooliope Jellington is another monster featured in the "Freak du Chic" webisodes and doll line. She is extremely tall, 15 feet, and mostly raised as a circus performer. The circus and its performers demonstrate abnormal characteristics that blur the distinction between normality and monstrosity. Similar to Campbell and Hoem's (2001) critique of the "Humbug" episode of *X-Files, Monster High* uses the "Freak du Chic" webisodes "to satirize freak show dehumanization" and showcase the "…participation of 'freaks' themselves in self-exhibition and their pride in their own performance" (p. 52). In the

Frights, Camera, Action special (Blais &Lau, 2014b), the villain vampire Stoker has an assistant Ygor who resembles a shorter version of Disney's Quasimodo. His purpose is to serve Lord Stoker, yet he is often ridiculed for being childish and unintelligent. Monsters that serve, assist, and scheme with the evil antagonists are depicted as bestial or "freaks" with a deformity or unusual condition.

Whether it is transformation, disfigurement, or size, the abnormal characters are misunderstood, receive sympathy, and display unusual monstrosity (Campbell & Hoem, 2001). It is important to note that the freak qualities are innate, which leads to the following discussion of disability and differently-abled bodies and their meanings with young audiences.

Zombies and Disability Characteristics. Although one of the limitations of this particular research excludes disability as a social construct, it is important to note that many characteristics of several monsters, especially the zombies, can be critiqued critically through an intersectional lens which includes disability. Clasen (2012) described a zombie as "a reanimated human corpse and a 'person' without a mind, or at least with severely impaired cognitive functioning" (p. 225). People with physical and intellectual disabilities are perceived in negative roles and seen as the Other. Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen (2013) discussed Plato and Aristotle's argument that "the ability to reason [is] a key to being human"; therefore, anyone who is not capable of logical reasoning and judgment should be considered less human (p. 181).

Incompetence, childlike features and gestures, immaturity, deformity, and physical impairment are disability-related stereotypes (Schwartz, Lutfiyya, & Hansen, 2013). The other monsters at the school often complain about how "slow" the zombies

are. While “slow” illustrates the actual speed of the zombies, the term “slow” can be implied as an intellectual disability. One of the main ghoulfriends, Ghoulia Yelps, is a zombie who is smart, shy, and often has her head in the books. She is very pale and she wears glasses. However, her facial expressions and body movements are limited due to her zombie nature. Her zombie language consists of only moans and grunts. Ghoulia, has a crush on a zombie named Slo-Mo, who resembles Lurch from *The Addams Family*.

Zombies are typically bodies without minds; however, the creators decided to make Ghoulia one of the smartest characters of *Monster High* (Best of Ghoulia Yelps, 2015). Zombie speech is indiscernible, yet the ghoulfriends seem to understand everything Ghoulia mumbles and grunts. The zombies are definitely monster outcasts because of their sluggish tempo and convoluted garble. They often are seen drifting the hallways aimlessly and unaware of their surroundings or anything that is happening. The depictions of Ghoulia and the zombies parallel media characters like Quasimodo, Lurch, Gus, and Dopey. Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen (2013) pointed out “Gus” in *Cinderella* “speaks in a low register which differs from the high squeaky voices of the other mice, stutters when he talks, and is the most difficult mouse character to understand” (pg. 185). They further discussed the imbecile and childlike depiction of Dopey’s character, which is “the object of ridicule, and the eternal child” (pg. 183). The depictions of Ghoulia are problematic because her intelligence contradicts her speech patterns and lethargic mannerisms. Even though Ghoulia was established as one of the main ghoulfriends, her character is not included in the *Monster High* reboot post-2016. There is uncertainty whether her character will be included in the new *Monster High* animated narrative; however, a new Ghoulia doll was released in 2017 as part of an exclusive 2-pack set with

Cleo de Nile.

Monster High has created a monster consciousness of what monsters experience and provides interpretations of monster oppression, which alludes to a common experience among all monsters. However, hybrid monsters, circus freaks, and zombies allow audiences to see that not all monsters are treated the same and the abnormal monsters experience different types of oppression.

Conclusion

Monster High is a heterotopia that distorts the queered representations of American culture, hegemony, and identity and propagates "Otherness" as idealism. McNally (2011) argued that cultural studies have situated monsters as "markers of nonconformity and perversity, representing all those marginalized by dominant discourses and social values… monstrous otherness is projected onto those who do not conform to cultural codes and norms" (p. 10). The creators of *Monster High* are producing a world of fantasy for its young audiences and while it may seem innocent and fun, the animated series is problematic for a number of reasons. There is already a great issue with the lack of diversity in animated shows and the utilization of fictional monsters instead of animated humans reinforces the problem that animators do not challenge racial narratives and gender identities. Their way of providing counter-hegemonic narratives is through monstrous and queered identities of unrealistic characters.

From a young age, children look for toys and characters that they can relate to and it's disheartening to think that children gravitate toward monstrous characters because they associate themselves more with monstrous identity than white heteronormative identity. Bettany and Belk (2011) argued, "We need Otherness to define self…in light of

postmodern diversity and hybridity, we need increasingly fundamental Others against whom to construct ourselves" (p. 163). But how are children constructing their identity compared to monsters and are they relating more to monsters than the "normal" animated human characters? While this particular research does not analyze audience feedback and viewer responses, many blogs and social media postings discuss the racialization of characters and the ways in which some respondents identify with characters that depict race and ethnicity like Clawdeen as African American or Jinafire as Asian American.

With any doll, there will be debates about body image and hypersexualization; however, for *Monster High*, the gendered performances may be a greater concern. Audiences take into consideration that the monsters are animated dolls with exaggerated tiny bodies and sexy fashion apparel; however, the actions and storylines of the ghoulfriends perpetuate stereotypes about binary gender roles. Therefore, two things affect audiences: the physical appearance and the gender performance. The ghoulfriends fall short of the progressive female character tropes that are independent, intelligent, and unemotionally attached to a boy. Sports is typically an area where one or two of the ghouls can exhibit their strength and skillset, but it is short-lived and mocked by other characters that suggest the ghouls should stick to fashion, shopping, or make-up. And if the ghouls are interested in new hobbies or interests, it is usually to attract the interest of a boy.

From a postmodern perspective, young viewers can dismiss the physical attributes of the characters as exaggerated, fictional, and fanciful. However, it's harder to ignore elements of discrimination and prejudice within the storylines. The main premise of the series is to accept freaky flaws, but every show depicts a character that struggles with

being accepted. Bullying in the series may be resolved within 60 minutes, but the issue is not resolved in real life the same way. Lemish (2011) concluded that children's programming should "enable (children) to understand what it is like to live in a society of inclusion," however, *Monster High* presents a queered representation of an inclusive society. The programs encourage young audiences to accept themselves for who they are, but it makes the viewers re-evaluate themselves as the "other" based on their interactions with other people. It begs the question, if comparing oneself to a monster has a positive or negative impact on socialization

SING IT LOUD: MUSICALS, MUSIC VIDEOS, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Children born in the 21st century have grown up with digital technology infused in their daily lives. Digital media, social media, and web-centered products cater to younger consumers who are adept at new and changing technology. Bickford (2012) stated, "childishness is a characteristic feature of new media" because marketing agencies have implemented interactive strategies for young consumers, hence creating "cultural norms of childhood," where technology and children's products converge (p. 420).

Since 2005, the demand for children's pop music has increased and led to the success of Kidz Bop, musical movies created by Disney, and young pop stars like Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, and Justin Bieber (Bickford, 2012). Disney has seamlessly intertwined music and performance into the majority of their programming, launching separate music careers for many of the young actors like Demi Lovato, Sabrina Carpenter, and Zendaya. Disney and Kidz Bop have successfully replicated popular songs and sanitize them for younger audiences. This has led other media producers and industries of children's culture to follow suit. Hasbro made several attempts to enter the entertainment sphere. Hasbro was working a deal with DreamWorks animation that fell through in late 2014. The deal was intended to create a media outlet for the My Little Pony, G.I. Joe and Transformers toy lines (McQuilken, 2014). Hasbro also worked with a channel called The Hub to host animated shows of their toys, but conditions of that agreement changed once The Hub was rebranded and sold to Discovery. Currently, Hasbro has established an independent production studio, Allspark Pictures, which produced *Jem and the Holograms*, the third and fourth sequels of *Transformers*, and *My Little Pony* movies (Theilman, 2015).

Mattel, Inc. wanted to approach the Monster High franchise differently. The toy manufacturer wanted to expand their company by producing their own movies and TV shows for the franchise. Similar to the efforts of its competitor, Hasbro, the company wants to develop the storylines of its toys and media productions as original products, not recycled from storybooks and fairytales. By the late 1980s, Mattel had a few shows and movies based on Barbie, but after 2001, the toymaker decided to produce more animated films to market the doll line. For *Monster High*, DHX Media, which according to their website is the "world's leading independent, pure-play children's content company," co-produces the movies and shows for Mattel (DHX Media, 2018). In the 2003 annual report, Mattel explained the new marketing strategy for the company:

The new mantra for Barbie is not about a multitude of different dolls, but instead focuses on a strategy based on storytelling, enhanced with technology and age-appropriate aspiration. Mattel's 2003 report stated:

> With the success of the Barbie entertainment series, we've learned that when we combine the Barbie brand with storytelling or content, girls become more engaged with the brand and in turn, connect with the product. For 2004, we have re-established the brand into content-rich worlds, which we call the "Worlds of" strategy. First, we write engaging stories for girls, then create dolls and toys to play out these stories. Second, we tell these stories through value-added content like movies, books, magazines and music.
>
> The "Worlds of" approach not only provides enhanced play value for girls, but also provides a platform for a broader scope of product that complements the story, giving girls more and more reasons to buy deeper into the brand (2003, para

3-4).

For this chapter, music, music videos, and popular culture as "value-added content" will be the focal point for how the toymaker markets, promotes, and sells Monster High merchandise to its young audience. The producers of *Monster High* incorporate references most familiar with the audience, such as popular films, music, music artists, and other television programs. Popular culture is a vehicle for incorporating mass media satire and attracting the interest of Mattel's tween demographic. There are also explicit and implicit references to cultural icons from the past and the present. Watching any given webisode of *Monster High*, viewers will find it difficult to ignore the bombardment of allusions to pop culture and music.

Postmodernism and the Music Video

The discussion of the modern music video begins with the history of music television, specifically the predominance of MTV. Jameson (1991) referred to MTV as a "spatialization of music," which surrounds the consumer instead of being confined to a specific area (p. 299). He also compared music video to animation because it is the combination of images and sound. Fiske (1986a) argued that MTV and the music video are the first modes of postmodern television. The music video has three aspects, which are "the foregrounding of the signifier over the signified, the openness of its textual structure, and its popularity for a non-conventional, possibly oppositional audience" (p.74). He continued that MTV is not confined by ideology, but instead, resists it.

In contrast, Tetzlaff (1986) argued, "MTV's apparent meaninglessness is the source of its ideological power" because while producing "superficial pleasure," it also presents "models of attitude and behavior and a particular way of seeing the world" (p.

84). He added that “rationality and rhetoric are not necessary to encourage the consumption of commodities and ideologies” because postmodernism has transformed how audiences can physically engage in music through the body (p. 86). Yet, Fiske (1986a) and Tetzlaff (1986) agreed the music video showcases fashion as a commodity to audiences while presenting the imagery in a nonsensical way that fragments the meaning. Kinder (1984) added that music videos were perceived in various ways such as a “combination of music and images that redefines audiovisual relations, …a new means of marketing records…that is saving the pop music industry, or a new source of violent sexist sadomasochistic images infecting the minds of our children” (p. 2).

Chen (1986) referred to MTV as a “schizophrenic simulacrum” which contains multiple art forms to produce its own notion of the channel as a hyperreality (p. 66). Kaplan discussed MTV as a “televisual apparatus” which she describes as:

> the technological features of the machine itself (the way it produces and presents images); the various “texts,” including ads, commentaries, and displays; the central relationship of programming to the sponsors, whose own texts-the ads-are arguably the *real* TV texts; and, finally, the reception sites - which may be anywhere from the living room to the bathroom (1987, p. 3).

Kinder (1984) added, “Everything on MTV is a commercial---advertising spots, news, station ID's, interviews, and especially music video clips” (p. 5). One of the most significant aspects of MTV was the promotional value of the channel and the visibility of products, programs, and videos to viewers. In this way, the YouTube channel of *Monster High* is presented as a “televisual apparatus” that produces, promotes, and distributes the programs, advertisements, music videos, and behind-the-scenes videos of the franchise.

Music Videos and YouTube

Kinder (1984) argued that the incorporation of music launched a subgenre of "films that weave loose narratives around hot dance sequences created by montage and that generate fast-selling videos" (p. 2). Vernallis (2010) explained that the definition of the music video is ever changing. The music video was once "a song set to memorable imagery, paid for by the record company to promote the song or musicians, and screened on cable" (p. 236). However, the current landscape of YouTube and the Internet has changed the aesthetics and dissemination of music videos.

In comparison to television, Kaplan's (1987) argument describes the current nature of YouTube, that it "has neither a clear boundary nor a fixed textual limit…a frame through which a never ending series of texts moves laterally" (p. 4). Initially to view a music video, viewers were dependent on music television channels such as MTV, VH1, and BET. Early music videos replicated a hyperreality fixated on performers in a concert arena surrounded by ecstatic fans. Today, the music video has become " a genre with its own conventions, ways of carrying a narrative, eliciting emotions, deploying performers, settings and props, and conveying space and time" (Vernallis, 2017, par.1).

With the advent of access sites like YouTube, Vevo, and Vimeo, audiences are directed to websites to view music videos. By transitioning from television to online, it changes how audiences consume and interpret music videos. Consumers are not limited to only purchase content, but share, replicate, interact, criticize and parody music videos and the artists. Accessing music videos online allow Internet users to "deconstruct a video, fragment it, reassemble it and…re-author it" (Railton & Watson, 2011, p. 143).

The Internet also affects the production, visual imagery, and content of music

videos. For television, music videos typically fell within a short time frame equal to the length of the average song. Currently, musicians can push the boundary by producing longer videos and include nudity and expletives that are normally censored for television. The Internet also allows for experimentation with users such as interactive music videos, where audiences engage by clicking their mouse to reveal different elements or changing the narrative completely. The Internet viewed by computer or mobile screens have a different aesthetic look compared to television, although the advent of media streaming devices allow for YouTube and video apps to be displayed on television screens. Using YouTube allows for Mattel to act as their own marketing agency, promoting the product through videos and bypassing using external advertisers for their online material. The incorporation of YouTube and other social media sites establishes a virtual forum for Monster High consumers to "enact identity subversion through play" and then, discuss their "discourses of play and fandom" online (Austin, 2016, para. 3.7).

Pop Culture Influence or Pop Culture Parody?

Vivian Sobchack (2006) determined the film *Final Fantasy* was problematic for many viewers that were displeased with the animated human cast of characters, rejecting the hyperreal depictions of the human versus alien conflict in a futuristic setting. She chose a viewer's comment from IMDB to convey viewer expectations of animation:

> Animation films are entertaining when we know that they are animation films. They are something different from reality, and all the imperfections we find in them don't count. All the holes we ... find are filled with our imagination ... But, when the level of perfection of an animation film crosses the line between animation and reality, then we change our scale of values, and we judge the film

> by comparing it with non-animation film. [This] is when we notice ... that there is still an abyss between a real and a virtual actor (Sobchack, 2006, p. 172).

Although, this comment applies in general to mass-produced animated films by large media companies, this same principle can apply to the success of *Monster High*. This expectation describes how *Monster High* is an "irreality" that replicates popular culture and social contexts in a virtual setting. The series is overlooked for the same reasons that Reid-Hresko & Reid (2015) argued other animated shows like *South Park* avoid social critique: "the show's complete irreverence, the use of children as the vehicle for social criticism, and animation as the visual medium" (para. 4). Although *Monster High* does not discuss political, economic, and cultural issues directly like other animated shows such as *The Simpsons, South Park,* or *The Boondocks*, it highlights matters, i.e. bullying and prejudice, that concern and influence children and teenagers in a social context.

There are several media references in *Monster High*. In the webisode, "Copy Canine," Clawdeen forgets to study for an important test and the ghouls pick at her for watching her favorite show "America's Top Monster" instead of studying. The ghouls often discuss their favorite movie franchise, "Twi-Hard." There are installments such as "Twi-Hard 3: The Final Sparkle" and "Twi-Hard 4: Abs of Intrigue," which mock the *Twilight* Franchise. The parodied shows satirize the gender messages of programs like *America's Next Top Model* and the *Twlight* Franchise that emphasize beauty and relationships.

There are other references to media such as the school production of "West Side Gory," the release of Johnny Spirit from detention (resembling James Dean from *Rebel Without a Cause*), and attending the concerts of the Jaundice Brothers (Jonas Brothers)

and Justin Biter (Justin Bieber). In the webisode "The Nine Lives of Toralei," her background story is presented in an entertainment report, "Monster High True Monster Stories" (E! True Hollywood Stories). The realm of *Monster High* serves as a mirrored monstrous projection of the current global society. Incorporating monstrous versions of celebrities adds to not only the parodied function of the series, but the series functioning as a hyperreality that references and reinforces certain aspects of popular culture that relate to young viewers.

Monsters in Motion: Zombies Can Dance Too!

Like most animated shows tailored to children, the incorporation of music has a pivotal role in marketing to and engaging young audiences. Sometimes music compliments the storyline or is presented as part of the narrative, where the character is a singer performing for an audience. For marketing purposes, the music may accompany a particular dance or performance that demonstrates choreography for audiences to adopt. The integration of social media and dance, what Bench (2010) termed as "social dance-media," allows choreography to be "shared, copied, embodied, manipulated, and re-circulated rather than preserved for the professional and elite dancer" (p. 184). Social media has preserved and reintroduced dance crazes such as *Macarena, Gangnam Style, Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae),* and *Thriller* to create new "movement communities" (Bench, 2010, p. 184). Bench (2014) speculated that dancers and online users redefine the choreography and video of *Thriller* as a "privileged site for articulating a collective sense of belonging" (p. 394). The choreography of *Thriller,* among many dance crazes, has been heavily imitated and incorporated into wedding dances, flash mobs, Halloween events, and world record dance events. Bench (2010) stated "Crowdsource, flash, and

viral choreographies… reconfigure dance as a site of social exchange and engagement by providing the vehicles for sharing and circulating dance" (p. 184). Interestingly, *Thriller* has remained one of the most influential videos and become a cultural artifact when it was the first music video to be inducted into the National Film Registry in 2009 (Library of Congress, 2009).

Mercer (1993) analyzed Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video and examined the "specificity of the music track" and the "internal structure of the video as an intertext of sound, image, and style"(p. 96-97). Mercer argued that *Thriller* incorporates montages and repetitious images and sounds, "but organizes the flow of images by framing it with a powerful storytelling or narrational direction which provides continuity and closure" (Mercer, 1993, p. 96). The music video produced as a short film allowed for Jackson to creatively create a horror narrative for the song. John Landis, the director of Jackson's video *Thriller*, combined two film elements into the video: "a narrative direction of the flow of images and special effects techniques associated with pleasures of the horror film" (Mercer, 1993, p. 98). The use of monsters, graveyards, and a nighttime backdrop create the simulated images often associated with horror films. Bench (2014) argued "*Thriller*'s flirtation with monstrosity proves instrumental in encouraging the piece's adaptation…as a metaphor for difference and the threat it poses to community cohesiveness" (p. 394).

This discussion of monsters in motion pays particular attention to the webisode, "Zombie Shake." As the webisode begins, the ominous pipe organ plays as lightning flashes in the background. Ghoulia is in a science lab mixing chemicals when the mixture explodes and infects her. Her body illuminates and she immediately reacts and begins to

dance. Her legs and arms begin jerking and twitching, simulating zombie movements of horror films. Everyone she bumps into begins to dance as well, as if they have been infected with the dancing disease. The zombie shake is a contagious dancing experience for every monster. Ghoulia and the dance-infected monsters exhibit dominance and supernatural strength breaking down doors and taking over the school. Within horror films, the "normal" characters fear the monster and seek refuge to "avoid the grip of the creature [and] avert an accidental brush against this unclean being" (Carroll, 1990, p. 17). Fillol, Salvadó-Corretger and Bou i Sala (2016) explained the zombie archetype perpetuates the "imaginary of the over-exploited slave" being possessed and plaguing the living community (p. 56). Several monsters reveled throughout the halls, joining Ghoulia's zombie apocalyptic dance, but there are a few characters that hide in fear to avoid coming in contact with her contaminated body.

In chapter four, I discussed how Ghoulia and other zombies are social constructs of disabled bodies. The dance movements of Ghoulia mimic people with physical disabilities. As out-of-the-ordinary behavior for Ghoulia, her performing body draws attention from the other animated characters and the *Monster High* viewers. Whatley (2007) indicated that when viewers are aware of a disability performance, it changes their perceptions and expectations of the acts. The "presumption of difference… plays into and reinforces dualistic thinking and attention on embodied binary oppositions: valid/invalid, classical/grotesque, deviant/ideal" (p. 17).

Other monster performances and dances were not highlighted in the same manner as Ghoulia's zombie shake. I can speculate that the video served as a way to connect to young audiences to mimic the zombie movements and create some type of dance craze

among *Monster High* fans comparable to the popular *Monster Mash* song played every Halloween on the radio. Ghoulia "virally" spreading the dance among the monsters signifies how the video should be shared "virally" online along with the hashtag #zombieshake. In her discussion about *Thriller,* Bench (2014) noted how "emulating the zombies on television and incorporating their movement, 1980s youths…rehearsed an aestheticized version of monstrosity in the safety and comfort of their living rooms" (p. 399). In the new millennium, the youth want to emulate dances and choreography associated with current songs, which creates new dance challenges that are searchable via hashtags. Dance challenges operate as a way to engage consumers by posting their rendition of a dance to social media, sharing with their followers. Many artists like Ciara, Drake, and Chris Brown create a dance challenge and hashtag to further promote their songs. User engagement allows for participants to feel as if they are part of a larger dance challenge community. *Zombie Shake* adopts similar cultural references of *Thriller* and other horror films, such as the puppet-like limb movements, the hands breaking through doors and rising from the graves, and the increasing number of zombified participants. But are the emulated dance movements a performance of monstrosity or disability?

Although *Zombie Shake* may not equate to the popularity of other dance crazes, as of September 2018, the video has over 1.6 million views on the official *Monster High* channel and numerous online users that have reposted the video on separate channels. Bench (2010) contended, "It is the bodily reproduction of the choreography—the steps, gestures, and timing of movements—upon which a viral choreography hinges" (p. 203). In this sense, the choreography of a video is more significant than the music, in which the replication of movement is signified among viewers and spectators. For monstrous

movement, it is important for the movement to remain in the same context as the music because once the movement is separated from the song; the dance simulates a disability performance. This is problematic in a society where differently abled people are ostracized and perceived as "other," and for children that may experience some form of bullying from their peers. While the video is encouraging a sense of community among the fandom, participants take on the act of performing disability, instead of understanding the "being" of disabled people. Wood (2003) argued that zombies differ from other monsters because "they lack one of the crucial defining characteristics, energy, and carry no positive connotations whatever" (p. 102). I speculate this point supports the reason Ghoulia was omitted from the rebooted media specials *Welcome to Monster High* (Donnelly & Reed, 2016) and *Electrified* (Falkenstein, Veilleux, & Zourelidi, 2017). The other zombie characters still exist, but a new ghoul Moanica, who can speak and does not exhibit any zombie behaviors, was introduced to the newer storylines.

Lady Gaga Meets Zomby Gaga

Several allusions to celebrities have appeared throughout the series as monstrous fictional characters. The monstrous version of the celebrity becomes a stereotype of their real persona. Unlike *The Simpsons* where several celebrities provide their voice for the parodied version of themselves, *Monster High* only satirizes the name and depicts their profession to allude to particular celebrities. Cohen (1996) stated, "When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self" (p. 17).

Late 2016, Monster High partnered with Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation to create a new doll, Zomby Gaga, which is "inspired by Lady Gaga to champion

kindness, instill bravery, and build a world where young people celebrate their differences" (Mattel, 2016). Lady Gaga (real name Stefani Germanotta) is widely known for her "unpredictable theatricality, avant-garde fashion, gender-bending performance, and GLBTQ activism" (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013, p. 360). The zombified Gaga doll has a face that resembles a skull with large brown eyes and darkened areas around the eyes. Dark veins run down the top of the head. She has pastel pink, gray, and lavender hair wrapped up in a side ponytail. The doll wears a black tuxedo and bowtie accessorized with black shades, black platform heels, and a detachable inflated bubblegum bubble. Gaga's sister Natali Germanotta designed the doll based on the zombie character depicted in the *Born This Way* music video (Mattel, 2016).

Gaga refers to herself as "Mother Monster" and her fans are labeled as "Little Monsters." Her fans connect with her because her persona is "both a maternal safe haven and an eccentric symbol drawing on the current cultural preoccupation with the monstrous" (Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013, p. 361). Mendez (2017) suggested, "We are meant to perceive Gaga as "Mother Monster" 100% of the time, and as such, this role manifests into her music…as a monstrous maternal figure" (p. 75). Halberstam (2012) attributes Lady Gaga as a "recent marker of the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality, and as a channel for potent new forms of relation, intimacy, technology, and embodiment" (p. 25). Since music videos are no longer dependent on television channels, Railton and Watson (2011) argued that the convergence of Internet, social media, and music video commands scholars to "rethink music video as a particular kind of product that implies a multifarious set of cultural practices and operates as a complex form of cultural representation" (p. 142). The researchers also pointed out that

Lady Gaga is one of the first music artists that was able to exploit and profit from the "relationship between the internet, digital music culture and contemporary patterns of music video production, distribution and consumption" (p. 144). Lori Pantel, Senior Vice President and General Manager of Mattel Girls Brands, said Zomby Gaga was developed to "reintroduce the brand's purpose to a new generation of fans" (Mattel, 2016). Monster High wants to replicate Lady Gaga's marketing strategies because she has managed to use the Internet and digital media to connect to her fans, disseminate her content, and explore the various new ways that young audiences consume music.

Critics attribute Gaga's success with "empowering marginalized bodies and challenging identity politics through the aesthetics she incorporates into her performativity" (Mendez, 2017, p. 74). Her empowerment themes, monstrous persona, and non-normative performance and visuals encourage scholars to delve deeper into Gaga's role in changing identity and consumption in a digital media culture. Lady Gaga inspired Halberstam's (2012) discussion of "gaga feminism," which is "a form of political expression that masquerades as naïve nonsense…[finding] inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish" (p. 22). Halberstam argued, "Gaga feminism" is for "the freaks and geeks, the losers and failures, the kids who were left out at school, the adults who still don't fit in" (p. 62). The concept of gaga feminism and Lady Gaga's persona aligns with Monster High's stance to create "positive social change and [emphasize] the importance of kindness and bravery" (Mattel, 2016).

The release of Zomby Gaga was met with a music video, *Gaga for Ghouls,* featuring the new doll dancing with the other monsters. The video showcases the physical dolls edited in a stop motion format to feature different fashions for each doll. Only a

physical doll was released, not an animated version for the series. However, online users can modify the doll through the website dressupwho.com and change the hair, outfit, shoes, makeup, and more. Click, Lee, and Holladay (2013) concluded "Gaga rearticulates the negative connotations of 'monster' to encourage and empower her fans, enabling them to use her to reflect upon their own self-identities, to build self-confidence, and to embrace their differences from mainstream culture" (p. 376). Tapping into the business practices and fandom of Lady Gaga, Mattel was able to promote the Zomby Gaga doll as an event, lure fans that associate with monster culture, and open the possibility to align with other celebrity figures in the future.

"Imagined" Locations in *Monster High* Universe

Monster High creates several storylines and characters that incorporate a global identity. Global regions and identities are sometimes satirized through American notions about international and local cultures. One way of influencing public perception about globalization is to subtly insert it into media, such as books, magazines, and television shows, or presenting cultural adaptations of familiar shows. The storylines of certain media contain elements of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism that audiences accept as the norm. Concerning the media and mass communication, globalization is more centered on the influence of culture, especially U.S. culture, to other parts of the world.

One example is the cultural adaptation of the animated series *The Simpsons*. For instance, there is an Arab version of the show called *Al Shamshoon*, that has changed character names and cultural food items. However, the Italian version took a process of changing "characters' names and accents, acronyms, jokes, catchphrases, cultural references, signs, billboards, advertising jingles, songs, and episode titles" (Ferrari, 2009,

p. 21). The producers even include regional stereotypes to fit the Italian culture. After this process, it would seem logical to just create a separate show independent of the original series.

However, for *Monster High*, the foreign exchange students insert global culture into the series through clothing, regional dialects, and certain customs. Globalization also takes the form of global travel as the ghoulfriends occasionally take trips or plan vacations to other cities or foreign countries that parody American cities and international destinations. The international locations and domestic regions are "imaginative geographies" that appropriate and dramatize the culture, people, customs, and geographical areas of foreign lands (Said, 1978).

Essence of "Boo York" City

The musical special *Boo York, Boo York* (Lau, 2015) parodies the location of New York City and the famous Broadway theatre. *Boo York* is an obvious reference to the 1977 musical film *New York, New York*, which entails two musicians falling in love yet struggling to keep the relationship together. There are three overarching storylines at play: a mysterious comet heading towards the planet endangering everyone, the de Nile and Ptolemy families attempting to merge and create a royal dynasty for the future, and a new character Catty Noir trying to find musical inspiration for her music career.

While the *Boo York* (Lau, 2015) special does not follow the exact storyline of *New York, New York*, it replicates the musical, aesthetic, and cinematic styling of New York City. The image of the city is only a replica that highlights certain characteristics that audiences associate with that particular location or region. Cinema, films, and music videos use visual aesthetics to project the realism of an area, as Shearer explained:

> musicals created an imagined New York that foregrounded the city's iconicity, particularly through the presence of the skyline in backdrops. Additionally, by focusing on urban neighborhoods and urban culture, particularly nightclubs and Broadway theatre, they depicted the city as a web of cohesive communities built around popular entertainment (2014, p. 55).

As the monsters start to travel to Boo York, a montage of images becomes a song sequence that depicts the city. There are aerial shots of the city which shows a landmark of a park that is shaped like the skull with a pink bow logo of Monster High and large buildings similar to the Empire State building. The city is also surrounded by water and the camera zooms into the bridge that leads into the city. Once on the streets, there is a plethora of yellow taxicabs and numerous billboards. The ghouls are entranced by the shopping and designer clothing. There is also a wide shot of the skyline and a fictionalized Statue of Liberty in the distance. The ghouls explore the subways, the "Bloodway" theater and encounter street performers.

All of these characteristics add to the aesthetics of New York City to project a sense of realism to the audience creating Said's (1978) "imagined geography." New York is highlighted as a glamorous city with fame and fortune and where anyone can come and realize their dreams of becoming a star. Because it is an animated series, it is minimizes the socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues of the city and marginalizes the presence of its citizens. The few characters, Mouscedes King and Seth Ptolemy, that are local to Boo York are part of the aristocratic society. Shearer (2014) indicated in the film, *New York, New York*, the two musicians have different interpretations about the song (theme song) and one of the characters mocks the idea of the song as "excessive ideas of the city

as site of the American Dream, with no element of doubt, uncertainty or recognition of the possibility of failure" (p. 61). It is this view of New York City as the "American Dream" that permeates into American and international media and reduces the experiences of average, working-class groups.

Dreams are Made of Musicals and Broadway Theatre

The inclusion of music and soundtracks in television and film has been a classic formula in Hollywood. Music soundtracks for films and shows that are produced as albums have found success and created a new niche in the music industry. For children, Disney managed to produce award-winning soundtracks catered to all audiences. Although soundtracks functioned as a separate way to monetize and market programming, FOX was able to create programs such as *Glee* and *American Idol* that monetized show content.

Moschini (2014) examined the postmodern characteristics of user-generated content from social media networks focusing mainly on intertextuality, metanarratives, and the construction of parodic texts. She argued, "*Glee* is a postmodern show because it is a pastiche of musical pieces, videos, and pop culture" and further added the show "exploits transmediality and social media" (p. 299). Similar to the postmodern characteristics of *Glee*, the TV special *Boo York, Boo York* (Lau, 2015) is a pastiche because of the musical numbers and music videos that can be viewed in a non-linear format across several media platforms (Moschini, 2014). The special simulates the Broadway-like experience for the characters and provides opportunity for the monsters to sing. On the YouTube channel, the special has been segmented into individual music videos. The songs can be enjoyed without having to fast forward or rewind through the

entire program. In comparison to *Glee*, the Monster High website and YouTube channel "…is a textual structure made up of a series of videos held together more by the focus on the characters and their musical abilities than on the events" (Moschini, 2014, p. 299). It is apparent that the *Boo York* (Lau, 2015) special was designed and edited as a series of music videos to promote the special, create an album soundtrack, and monetize the songs separately. The videos are viewed on YouTube, but the music singles are accessed through streaming platforms like Spotify and Amazon Music. The animated specials serve to market the physical doll line, in which *Boo York* generated six new doll lines featuring new monster characters and depicting the original monsters in stylish Boo York fashions.

Monster High is easily able to mimic particular settings, moods, lighting techniques and camera angles with accuracy infusing musical styles and videos into their animated narrative. In the opening scene for *Boo York* (Lau, 2015), Catty Noir is performing a song at a concert with audiences cheering, band musicians, and dramatic effects of lighting in the background. After the song, Catty enters her limo and the scene ends as an entertainment news report declaring Catty as "Musician of the Millennium" and "Queen of the Love Song." The report continues to discuss how the singer has quit show business abruptly.

The next scene takes place at Monster High School showing Catty trying to find a quiet place to write a song. As she sits in front of a piano, she becomes frustrated at not being able to come up with a song that relates to her. Then, she begins to play the piano to ironically sing a song about her frustration to write a song. The sequence becomes a music video where Catty is singing throughout the halls, on the stairwell, against a

locker, and eventually reaches the roof of the school. As she walks the halls, other monster characters are partnered up dancing slowly to the music. The scene ends with her singing to the stars in the sky.

In both scenes, Catty Noir acts as a performer for the viewers, engaging with the external audiences. In her discussion about rock videos, Kinder (1984) explained they are seen as "a chain of disparate images, which may involve the musical performers, but which stress discontinuities in space and time---a structure that resembles the form of dreams" (p. 3). When the character is singing, the song becomes an expression of the character's inner thoughts. Someone watching on the television or the computer screen serves an extension of the animated crowds in the scene. The song sequence also represents a dream where Catty is expressing how she feels alone among the sea of dancing couples.

Herhuth (2017) stated, "The metamorphoses, the visual metaphors, the caricatured characters, and the fantastic worlds of animated films have distinct purchase on the dynamics between sensorial perception and conceptual understanding" (p. 19). The official "Boo York"[9] theme song is reminiscent of the musical styles of Jay-Z's 2009 song *Empire State of Mind* featuring Alicia Keys. Freese (2011) noted Jay-Z references himself as "the new Sinatra," which pays homage to the "New York" theme song that Frank Sinatra later recorded in 1979. *Monster High* combines elements of both songs to recreate the sound and visuals for the *Boo York* (Lau, 2015) special. Seth Ptolemy (alias Pharoah) is performing the "Boo York" song in an underground setting. As he is rapping

[9] To distinguish between the movies and songs, *Boo York/ New York* in italics refers to the movie version, "Boo York"/ "New York" refers to the theme songs, the terms unformatted refer to the location

his lyrics, Catty Noir, feeling inspired, adds a hook to the song. Seth and Catty's performance imitates Jay-Z and Alicia Keys performing for the VMAs in 2009. The chorus sung by both Keys and Catty Noir evoke aspirational motifs of New York (Boo York) as a city of dreams and larger than life. Catty Noir embodies the persona of Alicia Keys as she sings to show off her vocal range and skillfully plays the piano. While the lyrics are not the same, the message echoes past musical tributes to New York as "the proverbial city that never sleeps" where dreams come true (Freese, 2011, p. 179). Viewers of *Monster High* are able to connect with the animated characters by interpreting and engaging with the performance. Herhuth (2017) defined the process as "addressivity" which allows films to establish "multiple relations between audiences, contexts, and animated films and to denote multiple directions of response and influence" (p. 20). Young viewers may not know Frank Sinatra or Jay-Z, but they are likely to be familiar with the catchy *New York* chorus and the aesthetics of New York City's architecture.

Broadway is another significant landmark of New York City, where actors dream of performing on the historic stage. For the ghouls, Bloodway is the desired location for aspiring monster thespians. The ghouls meet Luna Mothews, who has just arrived to the city to pursue her dream of performing in the famous theatre. However, the ghouls also realize that Toralei has crashed the trip too and desires to perform on Bloodway. At one point in the movie, Toralei has stolen Catty's voice, which is housed inside a crystal. She uses the opportunity to perform in a Bloodway show. As the ghouls go after Toralei, she is elevated on a platform singing to a packed theatre. She jumps down to the stage and signals for a spotlight. For this sequence, the audience is taken backstage where the ghouls are, back to Toralei's performance, and then situated among audience members.

Luna joins Toralei to try to retrieve the crystal. Luna begins to sing and the two monsters begin chasing each other in a synchronized and choreographed way between the various sets of the stage.

This performance is another way to demonize Toralei, the werecat. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Toralei is racialized due to the fact that she is often associated with criminal acts. The song for the video is "Steal the Show," referencing Toralei's actions of stealing Catty's voice and performing on Bloodway. The other monsters confront Toralei, referring to her as "Tora-Liar." Animation is always a place to explore good versus evil narratives, but Toralei's narrative is relegated to a secondary antagonist because among all other things, she cannot sing and has to use someone else's voice. Even in animation, the villain gets a chance to share their evil plan in song, but in Toralei's case, the other monsters sing her evil plan and demise in the song.

Egyptian Dance

One of the characters in *Monster High*, Cleo de Nile, is a depiction of ancient Egyptian culture. Her father is a mummified pharaoh and Cleo and her sister Nefera are princesses (Best of Cleo de Nile, 2015). As a part of upper class royalty in the series, they are always seeking to secure their future with riches and fortune. In *Boo York* (Lau, 2015), her sister Nefera plots to have her sister betrothed to another young royal figure to ensure financial stability. The scene of her evil plan converts into a dance routine and music video. As the music begins, the Anubis figures uncover her face with what resembles flabella (fans made of metal and feathers). It is a close-up shot of Nefera as she sings directly to the "camera," making eye contact with the viewer. The pharaoh joins in singing, where his "guest star" appearance adds to the illusion of the scene as a

"minifilm" (Kinder, 1984, p. 4). Her dance steps mimic the Egyptian hieroglyphs depicted in videos such as *Walk Like An Egyptian* by The Bangles or Michael Jackson's *Remember The Time*. Spencer (2003) explained that many early depictions of Egyptian dance was inscribed on rock art and inside the walls of temples and tombs and signified the occurrence of a royal ceremony or commemoration of the dead. In reference to the Bangles' song, audiences equate Egyptian dancing to:

> a stereotypical two dimensional "profile" position with arms extended, elbows and wrists bent at right angles, one arm up, one down. With alternate knees lifting and bending (also at right angles), they walk while rhythmically jerking their heads forward and back (Franken, 2002, p. 1).

The depiction of ancient Egypt and Eastern culture perpetuates "a centuries old discourse which frames the culture, people, and objects coming out of the East as things to be possessed, consumed, and tamed by those in the West" (Pennington, 2016, p. 112). Pop artist Katy Perry depicted Orientalist images in her 2013 music video *Dark Horse*. Pennington (2016) analyzed themes of the video and concluded that Perry is framed as an "empowered woman whose strength comes from her destruction of men of color" and contends that Egypt is portrayed "as a mute, exotic backdrop against which liberation based upon consumption is played out" (p. 116).

The earlier video of Catty functioned as a narrative, while Nefera's song was a spectacle emphasizing Egyptian culture and artifacts, rather than driving the story. Although the story is depicted in the city of Boo York, the suite of the de Nile family is imagined as a backdrop of Egypt. Said (1978) argued that Western civilization limits "Orient" culture to rich objects such as Cleopatra, the Sphinx, imaginary yet mysterious

monsters, etc. Miniature pyramids, gold columns, and embellished hieroglyphs situate viewers to envision Nefera as both the foreign subject and object of the video. Livingston (2015) examined the portrayal of Egyptian women by the *Los Angeles Times.* The research supported the notion that "socialization by the media causes consumers to accept myths and stereotypes about Middle Eastern women, including that they are victimized, veiled, or even barbaric" (para. 4). Nefera and Cleo de Nile are controlled by their father, who initially manipulated Nefera to unite with the young royal figure. The de Nile family is depicted as historical figures stuck in their time period.

Ironically, this is not Mattel's first time infusing Egyptian artifacts into a doll line. Milnor (2005) analyzed the Great Eras Collection, which was a series of dolls produced in the mid-1990s by Mattel to represent historical eras in time. One of the dolls produced was "Egyptian Queen Barbie" representing ancient Egypt between 1567 and 1320 B.C.E. Milnor argued that the doll allowed for a general understanding of the history of Egypt and Egyptian royal clothing. However, the doll portrayed Egypt as foreign, as if "Egypt existed only to create the material traces it left behind for the scholar to examine" (p. 229). The doll resembled the film version of "Elizabeth Taylor's rendition of Cleopatra" (Milnor, 2005, p. 231). While the Great Eras Collection of dolls provided little educational value, Monster High dolls peak the curiosity of young viewers to inquire more about Egypt. Information about Egypt and Egyptian culture is more accessible to children via the Internet and social media than it was in the nineties. The Egyptian culture is presented as exotic to viewers. Ott and Mack (2010) defined exoticism as the "ideologically-driven circulation and consumption of images of foreign lands that romanticize or mystify other cultures [which] strips them of contemporary political

agency by constructing them as primitive, unintelligent or animalistic" (p. 146). In accordance with Milnor, the brand portrays Egypt in the historical context and omits contemporary depictions of Egyptian people allowing viewers to interpret Egyptians as uncivilized further perpetuating Orient images as realism.

Conclusion

Although early research about music videos began in the 1980s, it remains an area for constant exploration in relation to the music industry, the performer, social media sites, popular culture, and consumers. Young people are more than consumers of pop culture and music; they reproduce, disseminate, critique, modify, and re-interpret cultural products.

Storey (2005) argued that postmodern culture allows for "cultural production born out of other cultural production" (p. 135). Music videos from MTV remained within the televisual space and were dependent upon the airplay of the channel. Today, online users are able to share and repost content anytime and anywhere as well as create GIFs or memes from the content to maintain its longevity in cyberspace. It is beyond the interpretation of the video; the consumption and engagement practices of users adapt to the online medium, which fragments the intended message.

However, for companies, selling the product is the main priority. Media producers monetize the online consumption of shows, movies, music, music videos and the apps that distribute the content. YouTube offers a premium service, YouTube Red, encouraging consumers to pay subscription costs for the ad-free content, original shows, streaming music, and offline play. The webisodes function as marketing tools for the physical dolls, which extend to buying DVDs of the TV specials and creating playlists of

the songs performed. Music also creates a sense of realism about the performer for young audiences, feeling connected with music artists like Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift. As a postmodern series, it utilizes postmodern strategies to connect to postmodern consumers. By incorporating pop culture and music in children's media, children are being conditioned to become active participants in the selection and purchase of cultural products, media, and music. I believe what started as a monstrous parody of American society somehow shifted to an Internet phenomenon of monetized cultural artifacts that transform the concept of children's media culture.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research is to formulate a more complex understanding of the social and cultural contexts, relationships, interactions and meanings within production, circulation, and distribution of *Monster High* media. This research explored how the *Monster High* monsters are constructed, the theoretical implications of those constructions, cultural consequences, and future directions. One of the largest appeals of the Monster High doll line is its representation of monstrous difference. Young consumers have to recognize, signify, and identify with the difference as otherness. The emergence of *Monster High* was possible through social media and YouTube, growing an audience through physical dolls and televised animated specials.

This research attempts to validate the media producer's intentions while examining the contradictions within the media message. The preferred reading of the *Monster High* series is postmodernism. Similar to other animated series and films, *Monster High* displays a multitude of postmodern elements, such as de-centering the subject, intertextuality, pastiche, transmedia storytelling, hyperreality, fragmentation, self-reflectivity, irony, and postmodern identity. The series recycles the stories of horror monsters, historical references such as holidays and fictional works, and various images of pop culture in the form of intertextuality and pastiche. Animation is typically characterized as postmodern considering its traits and deconstruction of dominant ideology within the messages. Children are able to distinguish the fanciful characters and storylines from reality. Magical elements, fictional places, and colorful and talking creatures allow for young children to separate realism and make-believe within the postmodern context of the series and television specials.

Another question this research attempts to answer is if *Monster High* teaches and influences attitudes about gender and social norms. A negotiated reading of the series allows for a closer examination into the gendered and racialized identities of the monsters as well as gender roles and racial tensions within the series. With respect to gender, *Monster High* presents the characters from a heteronormative perspective. While the series' mantra is to accept freaky flaws, there is still an expectation of how one should look and behave. Therefore, with the postmodern context of the series, the monsters are depicted in a heteronormative fashion. If a character deviates from social and gender norms, he or she is ridiculed by the other monsters. Most of the monsters have some type of racial or ethnic marker in the form of accented language, the clothing, the customs, or their native region. These racial and ethnic characters are often presented in a stereotypical way, either as devious or subservient. It is interesting that racial tensions and microaggressions exist internally between monsters when interacting with hybrid monsters, circus freaks, and zombies, who seemingly parallel mixed-race individuals and people with physical and mental disabilities.

This research also attempts to explain how *Monster High* uses music and popular culture as a marketing tool and cultural influencer. Mattel markets, promotes, and sells Monster High merchandise and media to its young audience by incorporating music, music videos, and popular culture. *Monster High* relies on references of popular culture and music as well as American symbols and signs. The series creates monstrous versions of celebrities, movies, and locations to parody American culture. Music videos from the series encourage audiences to engage, share, and replicate the dances and songs to foster a sense of community among the fans. The success of the Lady Gaga's partnership and

promotion of the Zomby Gaga doll demonstrates a profitable potential alliance with other entertainers and their fans. The *Boo York* (Lau, 2015) special was designed and edited as a series of music videos to promote the special, promote a new line of dolls, create an album soundtrack, and monetize the songs separately.

The combination of popular culture, music, and the online medium can also be problematic because it creates a sense of realism for children and fragments the intended message when taken out of context. Children that mimic singing and dancing monsters simulate disability performance. Images of cities and locations like New York City perpetuate the American dream myth of fame and fortune that is not realistic to reach. Other international locations and people are exoticized and presented from the Westernized perspective.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This research contributes to studies about children's animation, postmodern media, and the growing interest of digital media culture. This research also adds to the limited research about children's popular culture and the influence of music and music videos on children of all ages. Lemish argued,

> American programming for children has been strongly criticized… for being stereotypical of gender and race, for being irrelevant to indigenous cultures, for being too limited in scope of content and issues for children as they mature, for unnecessarily accelerating adulthood…(2011, p. 358).

Monster High media content includes stereotypical elements of gender, race, and other intersecting identities. The series and movie specials neglect contemporary depictions of

Eastern cultures, veer away from societal issues, and sanitize adult content for childhood consumption.

Some limitations of the research were the exclusion of certain theories to the narrow the focus. Initially, the research included feminism and critical race theory, but the analysis and methodology would have been different for every chapter and extend the length of the work. Therefore, the research was limited to postmodernism with respect to gender and race. Disability theory and queer theory are briefly mentioned and should be further examined for future analyses for *Monster High*. Few scholars have discussed *Monster High* and its message. From the few studies, most scholars focused on the sexualization of the physical dolls and the possible influence on young girls. Karen Wohlwend conducted a few studies about Monster High as a digital media culture that influences young girls, but concentrating more on the dolls, child's play, and digital literacy rather than the series and TV specials. Austin (2016) examined the queer politics of Monster High fandom in relation to the dolls and the media components. Further research can examine and gather data about online users and fans and their interpretation and identification with the physical or animated dolls.

Most of the webisodes and TV specials that were examined for this research were released before 2016. After the 2016 franchise reboot (also called Second Generation), as of 2018, two TV specials have been released, *Welcome to Monster High* (Donnelly & Reed, 2016) and *Electrified* (Falkenstein, Veilleux, & Zourelidi, 2017). These two specials are mentioned, but only in comparison to the earlier fragmented storylines of the series. In 2017, *Adventures of the Ghoul Squad* debuted as the new animated series, with ten-minute webisodes and is not included in the analysis of this research.

Although the sexual and racial depictions of the animated monsters are somewhat stereotypical, the overall message of *Monster High* to accept everyone challenges dominant ideology. The fictional depictions of *Monster High* are not as problematic as the greater issue that children cannot find vast diversity in animated images. Yes, these characters are monsters, but there is more diversity and cultural messages within the context of the *Monster High* than most children's programming. While young audiences may not identify with the physical and nonsensical appearance of the monsters, they can relate to the behaviors, interactions, emotions, and values of the animated characters. The growing popularity of non-traditional and non-white characters in animation proves that the changing demographics of American society demand for more diverse representations in programming, especially animation. While animated animals, magical creatures, and monsters are profitable; media industries are missing an opportunity to create realistic animated people with whom young children can identify.

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